

CAIRO TO PERSIA AND BACK

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By
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AUTHOR OF
"BY WAY OF THE SAHARA" AND "RUSSIA AT RANDOM"

WITH SIXTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS AND TWO MAPS

JARROLD'S *Publishers* LONDON
Limited 34 *Paternoster Row* E.C.4

MCMXXVII

PRINTED IN
GREAT BRITAIN,
AT THE ANCHOR
PRESS, TIPTREE,
:: ESSEX ::

To
ROY SHEPHEARD-WALWYN
with many thanks for his good Comradeship,
Forbearance, and Skill

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Cairo to Persia and Back

CHAPTER I

TO CAIRO

CHRISTMAS DAY is perhaps an odd choice for the start of a five months' journey ; but I had not bargained for a Christmas Day quite as odd as I actually experienced.

I was travelling to Egypt on an Italian ship, *terza classe distinta*—special third class—which meant that I would get to Alexandria at exactly the same hour as the first-class passengers for approximately one third of the price, and had embarked at Genoa on Christmas afternoon. At 7 p.m. that evening we of the special third class assembled in our saloon expecting some version—third-class possibly—of a Christmas dinner ; but for the next twenty minutes nothing happened at all. We bore the delay politely. For we were a mixed lot, and mixed lots—when they are “special” and not “ordinary”—are very genteel. I shared a table with a French priest and a Syrian doctor. On our left was a theatrical party, a Greek husband and wife who did a trapeze act, and two Rumanian female contortionists ; on our right four waiters—two Frenchmen, a German, and an Austrian—going out to Cairo for the winter season ; beyond them again three Argentine journalists in plus-four suits. The four waiters, naturally, were the first to lose patience—professional pride was involved ; and first one rang a bell, then another invaded the pantry ; but still nothing happened. Finally the German announced his intention of referring the matter to higher authority, and left us for the second class at the other end of the ship. He eventually returned with two stewards and a tureen of soup. The soup tasted of dish-clouts, but it loosened tongues ; and while we toyed with it, the German told us in high indignant tones that what had happened was that most of the first-class stewards had celebrated so freely before sailing as to

be useless at table. So their place in the first class was taken by a reinforcement from the second, while our stewards from the special third class had been commandeered *en bloc* for the second.

A common grievance makes the whole world kin; and while we waited another ten minutes for the next course I treated the trapeze artists and the contortionists out of my own bottle of whisky, and the two French waiters turned on their gramophone and, after first dancing together, took on the two contortionists, while one of the Argentines paired off with the female trapezist. It was great fun—apart from the dinner, which was a long horror. Both our waiters were extremely unsteady; and the fish was first-cousin to a shark; the macaroni, a semi-congealed pyramid of stickiness; the meat, unlike meat—even in colour; while the inevitable ice tasted of garlic. It ended by becoming the noisiest meal I remember since schooldays when the eggs were bad; and when the ice was removed amid cat-calls, there was a unanimous vote that something must be done. So we ordered brandies all round and went into conference, as a result of which one of the Argentines and I—because we knew how to write—were selected to put a joint protest on paper for the chief steward. The document was a masterpiece. After dilating on the quality and the unpunctuality of our late meal, we ended in a fine peroration to the effect that we were sure that if Mr. Mussolini knew how guests on an Italian ship were being treated there would be castor oil all round. We all signed it, and I rang the bell and handed the letter to the less inebriated of our two stewards, after which the French priest explained its contents to him in fluent Italian. The poor man blanched visibly and retired unsteadily. Ten minutes later he and his colleague, both of whom, from their dank appearance, had in the interval obviously been holding their heads under the cold tap, staggered back into the saloon bearing the letter in their hands; and with profuse apologies they entreated us to withdraw it. We listened coldly, dismissed the two varlets with great gusto, and resumed our conference. As *conférenciers* we were far more efficient than the equally cosmopolitan Assembly of the Nations in Geneva; and in ten minutes we had come to five decisions. We were prepared to say no more about the matter provided that:

1. (Proposed by the trapeze husband and wife.) Everyone should be re-berthed so as to have not more than two in each cabin. Up to then we had been piled four and six

deep into the minimum accommodation so as to give the stewards minimum trouble in cleaning up.

2. (Proposed by the four waiters.) All of us who had hot-water bottles were to have them automatically filled and put in our beds by nine o'clock every evening.

3. (Proposed by me.) The bathroom, which normally was open only between seven and nine in the morning, was to be available all day and all night.

4. (Proposed by the Argentine journalists.) The wireless bulletin should reach us in special third class on the day of issue—not three days later. (The Argentines had already experienced other third classes.)

5. (Proposed by the contortionists.) The two stewards must go at once to the first-class smoking-room and pinch at least two plates of sandwiches for us.

Then we had the stewards back. It was all rather like a court martial: the French priest read out our terms, and of course we won hands down. After that we had a great time. I went to bed at midnight—happy, but very weary. I had danced twice with each of the contortionists, and dancing with a contortionist is far more fatiguing and infinitely less satisfying than playing Yo Yo.

.

Two days later I had a curious adventure—not, I think, unconnected with the events of Christmas night. For the word had gone round among our now sobered stewards that the Argentine and I, because we wrote the letter, had been the authors of their humiliation. Anyhow, this is what happened. I still carry the purse which my father carried for forty years, and at night put it under my pillow. On the morning before we reached Alexandria I foolishly forgot it, and only discovered that it was missing about eleven o'clock; but, though my bed was made, there was no sign of the purse in my cabin, which I now occupied alone. I rang the bell and one of our Christmas heroes arrived, and in lame Italian I told him of my loss. His reaction was highly unpleasant. "What?" he snarled. "Are you accusing me or any of the other stewards of theft? If so, come at once to the Captain with me, as I feel insulted." And all at the top of his voice and with a wealth of gesticulation which made me giddy.

My Italian was far from competent to cope with such a situation; so, shrugging my shoulders, so much as to say that I neither believed nor understood him, I waved him out

of the cabin and sought the French priest. He was much shocked at the idea of robbery by one of his co-religionists, and when we met again at table he at once signalled to my voluble friend of the morning and proceeded to talk to him calmly but with terrific emphasis. And I noted with some satisfaction that from the outset the steward pointedly avoided his piercing eye. It was, "Yes, my Father. No, my Father. Naturally, my Father. Of course, my Father." The last with fanatic emphasis.

An hour later I was reading on deck, when I looked up to find the steward at my side, and in his hand my purse. He proceeded to inform me without a flicker of shame that it had been happily found since lunch in a place where I had never been. He then asked me to open the purse to see whether the contents were intact. I did so. The total of the money which I had had in the purse was correct : but whereas what I had lost had been half notes, half silver, what was restored to me was all silver ! Thank you, my Father. . . .

.

Next day we were in Alexandria, and at five o'clock that evening I was back in Cairo. It was just dark, and the streets were crowded and jostling ; and suddenly I knew the reason. Through the pink haze which is the twilight of the East, I saw low in the sky the sickle moon. It was the second night of Ramadan, the Moslem month of fasting, during which for twenty-eight days no drop of water, no morsel of food, may pass the true believer's lips between sunrise and sunset. The sun had just set, and now the crowds were preparing to make up for the privations of the day.

As a Christian, I ought not to have been affected at all ; and outwardly I was not. But inwardly I was so disturbed, or perhaps exhilarated, that after unpacking and dining quietly alone, instead of going to bed, which was the sensible thing to do, I slunk out into the streets, boarded a tram for the Pyramids, and for two perfect hours sat revelling in the silence of the desert. And then bathos. I looked at my watch. It was just ten o'clock, and I had to tear myself from the Sphinx to catch the last tram back to Cairo.

Just outside Giza it stopped very abruptly and, to the accompaniment of shrill giggling, my solitude was invaded by five very good-looking, young and unveiled Egyptian matrons. Of course, instead of sharing my male compartment, they ought to have retired modestly into the *harem*

accommodation, which was also empty ; but here they were, and my evening gave every promise of being decidedly blessed. The ladies chattered like magpies, and between their gusts of laughter I gathered from their mixture of Arabic and French that they had been paying Ramadan calls and that their chauffeur—that son of a dog—had given them the slip. Hence the tram, which otherwise they couldn't have dreamed of using. And what luck to have caught the last one. Otherwise home at midnight or later ! And all their husbands were as jealous and suspicious as cats ! The ladies shrieked shriller than ever. And then a sudden crisis. In came the conductor. "All change, please. This is the last tram, and it only goes as far as Giza and not to Cairo. Fares, please." The ladies rose in their wrath. "Fares, indeed ! What for ? For taking us a quarter of a mile and then dumping us in the depths of the country ? Not likely !" The poor conductor wilted before the storm, and in the end looked so pathetic that their feminine hearts melted. "Cheer up, brother," they said quickly. "It is not your fault that this miserable tram is a swindle. We are not angry with you. Here, have a *marron glacé* or a banana." And they proceeded to produce boxes of both which had been given them by their hostess of the evening.

Five minutes later we were marooned in Giza and the place looked as empty as Aberdeen on a flag day. Not a sign of a cab or a taxi, only an extremely dilapidated motor-bus looking as dead as a sleeping carhorse. My companions on their high heels tottered thankfully towards it, and through the silence of the night I heard them wake the sleeping driver and bargain shrilly and successfully for the whole accommodation back to Cairo. Then more laughter. Those husbands again ! Anyhow, this time they were doing the right thing and there could be no complaints from Ahmed or Hassan or Said, seeing that they had bought all the bus and would thus travel unmolested alone.

Only then did I awake to the reality of my own situation. This monopoly business was not fair. I too had to get back to Cairo. And now, how ? In my dilemma there was only one thing to be done, and feeling very much the infidel stranger, and steeling myself to the probability of a Moslem rebuff, I stepped smartly towards the bus. "Pardon me, an unknown stranger, thus daring to intrude on you," I said in my best French ; "but I too am stranded. How am I to get home now that you have bought the whole of the accommodation in the only available public conveyance ?" And, hat in hand, I

smiled the best imitation of a Ronald Colman that I could muster. The ladies eyed me with cold but intrigued suspicion; then they started to whisper; and luckily I could just hear and, still more luckily, just understand their Arabic. "He looks harmless," said one. Another: "Well, we can put him in the back seat." A third: "For goodness' sake make up your minds one way or the other, or we won't be home till morning, and then Ahmed will be all over the place." Obviously they were weakening, and as obviously it was the moment for me to drive home the attack. "Forgive me," I went on. "I am afraid I have overheard your words, and I understand Arabic a little. Please do believe that I am a *brave garçon* and that you need fear nothing. But I simply must get home somehow. My wife is terribly suspicious and jealous."

This non-existent lady won my battle for me. The five shrieked with delight. "Oh, you men! And what were you doing at the Pyramids, *mon brave garçon*? [Loud laughter.] No wonder your wife is jealous. But come along, we will give you a free seat back to Cairo. What fun! His jealous wife!" But once aboard the bus, far from being relegated to the back seat, I sat right in the middle of them all, with a *marron glacé* in one hand and a banana in the other. At once they began to rag me. "You understand Arabic? Then you speak it? Do say something." I stammered out a commonplace about the weather in Egypt being better than the weather in England; and, though I felt a frightful fool, I at once enjoyed the success of my life as a comic. They rolled on their seats with laughter. "*Ya salaam!* What an accent! But go on, say something else—this is far better than a play." On the whole I agreed with them. I was having the time of my life.

Suddenly with a scream of brakes the bus pulled up sharp under a street lamp just before the Abbas bridge over the Nile. In the beam of our headlights were two wild-looking Bedouin, swaying and posturing as one thumped a tom-tom and the other played a reed. They were professional musicians hired by Ramadan hosts, and were due back in Cairo for a further engagement. But when the bus-driver explained the *harem* monopoly to them, their wrath knew no bounds and they brought forth a host of obscenities which seemed to cover all women from the time when Eve gave Adam the apple. But, far from objecting, my hostesses seemed entranced and, leaning far out of the bus, shouted in their shrill Arabic, "And you also, brothers, shall travel with us and shall escort us to our homes—and with music!" Without any more ado,

in bundled the musicians, who, I noted with some personal satisfaction, were carefully consigned to the back seat, and then there were more *marrons glacés* and bananas all round and, with a wail from the reed and two thumps on the tom-tom, away we rolled to Cairo. The tune was a minor-keyed Arab love song, and in a minute the ladies had caught the refrain. "Tum tum tum . . . Tum tum tum . . ." and suddenly I found myself swaying and clapping to the rhythm and even joining in the unison, putting nonsense words to what I thought was the tune. It was an Arabian Night with a vengeance.

Our next halt was also abrupt. Another half a mile on, under another lamp-post, we were hailed noisily from the roadside by a large party of Ramadan strollers. But this time there was no palaver. "The more the merrier!" we all shrieked from inside. "Come on, all of you, come in and sing!" And off we went again: "Tum tum tum . . . Tum tum tum . . ." a rollicking crew crammed like sardines in the crazy vehicle which rocked like a ship at sea as we clapped and sang and stamped our homeward way.

Cairo came all too soon; and when we were within reach of my hotel I tapped one of my hostesses regretfully on the arm. "Thank you a thousand times," I said, and smiled. "My house is quite close here." She gave me a ravishing wink. "And your jealous wife, *mon brave garçon*."

Everyone wished to shake me by the hand, and I felt rather like the Prince of Wales in Copenhagen; but at last I was out, and away rolled the bus into those parts of Cairo where Egypt lives and where we foreigners do not reside. But for an hour I had been not only in the East, but almost of the East.

It was a wonderful start for my journey.

CHAPTER II

PREPARATIONS

I HAD a month alone in Cairo before Roy Shephard Walwyn, who was to be my sole companion on the trip to Persia, was due to join me from London, and during that month I had undertaken to do two things—to get a servant to look after us on the journey, and to buy a lorry and have a special caravan body built for it. I got to work straight away about the lorry and within two days had bought a Ford thirty-hundredweight chassis, with four gears and a reverse, and—on the advice of a desert motorist of vast experience—I increased its already excellent clearance by adding one leaf to each of the three springs. All this may sound prosaic—even dull. But it wasn't. I got a real thrill. For to own a virile lorry after years of girlishly purring motors is a thrill which only compares for exhilaration with the moment of promotion from long clothes to trousers.

Then came the question of the body, and the fun began. I selected as my coach-builder a scraggy little Egyptian called Mohamed Mohamed Omar. He was short, with twinkling brown eyes, and his dyed beard was trimmed like that of an Apostle, except that at either end of his mouth he had shaved clear spaces about the size of pigeons' eggs—an odd effect, but rather impressive. He was an Arab; his turban was white; his bare feet were shod in red-pointed slippers; and his three relays of robes—on the outside, dark blue cloth, in the middle, yellow and blue striped silk, and below that a spotlessly white *galabia* of calico—gave him the pleasantly free-striding look of a man of the desert.

I had drawn a design based on my experience with the grocer's van in the Sahara, and was rather proud of it. It was on squared paper, drawn to scale and neatly marked off in feet and inches, and, having handed it to Mohamed Mohamed Omar, I embarked on a rather chatty explanation. He listened politely and followed my remarks on the paper. At least I

thought he did. It was therefore rather an anticlimax to find that he had throughout been looking at the designs upside down. I corrected the error, whereupon he merely remarked, "*Ana fahem ; wallakin fain el sama ?*" ("I understand ; but where is the sky ?") I at once drew in a pair of wheels below the plan of the bodywork, and Mohamed Mohamed Omar heaved a sigh of great relief, turned the design right side up, and so far all was well. But he neither read nor wrote ; so we had to do the measurements like a repetition class at school. He was an extraordinarily quick pupil, and by the end of an hour, not only was he word perfect, but we were the greatest of friends ; and he told me that he would get the chassis down to his workshop at once, and that if I turned up there in five days, he would have something good to show me.

His workshop was a gaping niche in the blind wall of a filthy little lane in the Daher quarter of Cairo, and when I eventually found it, I knew that I was going to get value for my money. The little space that remained after the chassis had been accommodated, teamed with Arab life. Heavy-weights clashed hammers ; middleweights wielded saws ; lightweights worked the planes and the chisels ; while the bantams, the more recent arrivals in Mohamed's family—fat jolly little fellows of six and seven—stewed the glue, keeping it hot over an old petrol tin by burning wood shavings underneath it. And all were slamming and sawing and fitting for all they were worth, and climbing over one another as they got on with the job, just like a basketful of newly born kittens. And yet, though chaos seemed to reign, things were moving in the right direction.

During those five days Mohamed had built a whitewood skeleton of the body as he thought I had designed it. It looked exactly like a hearse—a joke which Mohamed Mohamed Omar thought was rather lacking in taste—but the idea was all right and the measurements merely needed scaling down ; and after another long repetition lesson he told me to come back in another week, when there would be something more permanent for me to see. In that week they must have worked like fury. For the body which they then showed me was very much a body and exactly what I wanted, and was even solid enough for me to test on the road. After the trial I shook him warmly by the hand and said I was very pleased. Mohamed was delighted and jumped up and down like a jack-in-the-box, and clapped his hands and chirped, while all his staff

jumped and chirped in unison. And that really was the fun of the whole thing. They knew I was keen, and as a result they were terribly keen themselves.

After that I was down there every second day. The roof went on ; the lockers for our odds and ends were fitted, and containers for the petrol supply and boxes for the tools where no thief would find them. Then the side curtains, and the sprung front cushion. Every day there was something fresh to show me. But some days things were not right ; and then, when I said that this or that had to be scrapped, there would be arguments and hurt looks and probably : "What does it matter ? It will be all right in the end." And then I would reply rather pompously, "If a thing is not all right, it is all wrong," which would be met with a polite smile as though I had made a joke. But in the end I would always be asked what I did want. Then we would all—heavyweights, lightweights, mediums, even bantams—go into conference and decide how it was to be done. And as often as not the alterations would be made straight away ; and when they were passed as good, there would be ecstasies of self-congratulation all round. For, as Mohamed Mohamed Omar was always saying, was he not my servant, and was not the honour of his house at stake ? Apparently the honour of the quarter was also involved, as, whenever I turned up, so did also all Mohamed's neighbours, who by this time had heard what was afoot and were taking as great a pride in Mohamed Mohamed Omar's creation as we ourselves did.

Meanwhile I had been attending to the second half of my mission—the finding of a servant. First I tried to rediscover one Hussein, who had been with me all the time I was in Egypt ; but after wasting three weeks I had to give up the search in vain ; and then, with time pressing, I made the inevitable mistake of over-haste. Mohamed Saleh had had, he said, experience of desert work both as a servant and chauffeur ; also he had good testimonials and was presentable—though on the sombre side. But he was a complete failure. I arranged for him to have lessons in cooking, with the only result that he disappeared for hours on end and on his return was quite unable to say what he had cooked or how he had done it. I persevered, at first patiently, then severely ; but all that would happen would be that his mouth would drop and he would shut his eyes. It was all as futile as hitting a pillow or stroking the Venus de Milo. His great phrase was that "by the eyes of his mother" he would obey

my every order ; but, as he seemed incapable of doing even the simplest item of routine without special orders, I eventually told him that if he thought I was going to run after him all day giving him orders, "by the eyes of his mother", he was mistaken.

Then with the car he was really dangerous. His slogan was "*Mafeesh benzeen*" ("There is no petrol") ; and finally one day I caught him hitting the carburettor with a hammer. That finished Saleh ; and next day I gave him notice. The corners of his mouth dropped and he shut both his eyes and then saluted gravely. I paid him his money, and he again saluted. But he did not go. I looked up from my table. He again saluted, and then, drawing a dismal breath of resignation, he asked me for a personal letter of recommendation to the head of the Cairo City Police ; for, as he said, he thought he would prefer being a policeman to being a cook. I gave him no recommendation, which I think pained him terribly. Anyhow, that evening he told a friend of his, who told a friend of his, who was servant to a friend of mine, that he had given me the sack because he thought that I and my plans were mad, and that in any case his wife's maternal aunt had told him that Persia was full of devils.

So when Roy Walwyn joined me there was no servant to accompany us ; but the lorry was almost ready for the road, and the gear which we had to take with us had at last been collected. The question of gear for journeys such as we were embarking upon, is difficult and tedious ; but in general it is wise to err on the side of lavishness and above all not to think that it is necessary to be uncomfortable because one is on trek. For it is a curious but very true fact that if one gets used to being uncomfortable one also gets used to dirt. And that way lies disaster. I have included as an appendix to this book what we took with us ; and, commenting after the event, I can honestly say that at one time or another we wanted everything we bought. But I did overlook one important item. I only took one watch with me, and it broke after two months ; and ever after that I was a constant nuisance to Roy Walwyn whenever I wanted to know the time.

When we were on the road we naturally talked "food" for hours on end, and debated endlessly on what were the most useful items of our stores. We put the essentials in the following order.

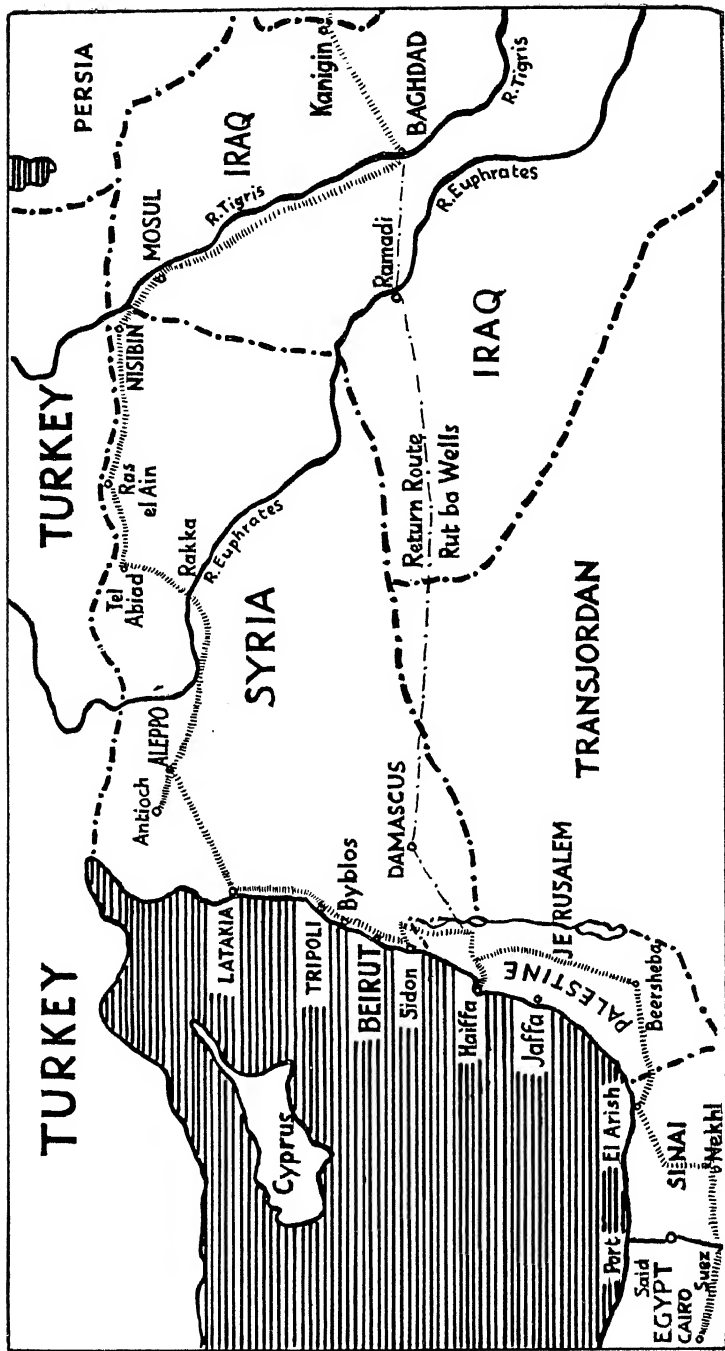
1. "*Vita Wheat*" biscuits. Native bread, though at first tasty, is very hard to digest unless your inside is made that way.

2. *Tinned grape-fruit*. It is acid and far more refreshing than the sweeter kinds of tinned fruit in hot weather.

3. *Unsweetened chocolate* to eat with Vita Wheat bread on the road, especially in the trying last hours of a long afternoon. We never stopped for tea.

4. *Quaker oats* : for a quick and fool-proof hot breakfast. In general, stores like tinned sausages and tinned bacon or ham are not worth their weight. They are expensive and go a very little way and have to be eaten quickly before they turn bad. Our midday stand-bys were sardines and bully beef. Bully has a pull over sardines, as plates dirtied by oily sardines are more difficult to clean after meals. And anyone who buys the new-fashioned sectioned cheese should be sure to test it before purchase. In hot countries stale stock goes as hard as iron and tastes like chalk. We carried no firearms with us and no alcohol except a bottle of the best brandy.

The day before we left, Mohamed Mohamed Omar came to see me to settle the account. I had originally bargained—with the usual alarms and excursions—for £40 as the price of the finished body. But when the time came for money to pass he asked for an extra £5. It had been a much longer job than he expected ; we had wanted so many extra fittings ; he had miscalculated the cost of the curtains and the sprung cushion ; etc., etc. I listened politely, but would not yield. He looked terribly crestfallen and pleaded hard : and then I had a brainwave. "Right, Mohamed," I said. "I'll pay £45, but only on these conditions—£40 now and £5 when I come back if the body is still intact. But if it breaks, you must refund £5. And we'll put it all down on paper." If there is one thing that Egyptians love more than a bargain, it is a written piece of paper ; so I drew up a superb document and signed it and Mohamed put his thumb-mark against his name : and then he gave me a great handshake. "And now, don't forget to go early to bed to-night," he said. "Only the strong can defeat the Desert."



CHAPTER III

CAIRO TO SUEZ

THE day we left, Egypt wept to see us go ; and when it rains in Cairo, which is made entirely for fine weather, life is very hard. Certainly Hassan, the room-servant in our hotel, found it very hard that morning. Not only was he depressed over our departure—the light was going out of his eyes, he said—but his job was to shift our gear from the hotel through the rain to the Turf Club yard where the car stood in readiness to be off. In the pouring rain his tarbush went limp, his grimy-looking *galabia* clung to his form in sodden folds ; and after one journey across the muddy yard he hung his slippers round his neck and in ten minutes was a mass of clinging mud up to the knee. I consoled him as best I could, partly by word of mouth, partly by jingling silver hopefully in my trousers' pocket ; and, thanks mainly to him, everything was clear of our rooms by 10.30 a.m. and we went out into the yard to begin loading.

I own that the sight appalled me. We seemed to have haystacks of luggage. But it is extraordinary how mass under control will compress itself within the narrowest spaces ; for in less than no time what had appeared to be chaos had flattened itself out into excellent order ; and, as Ann used to say in her tidy kitchen in Dublin years ago, there was a place for everything and everything was in its place. Admittedly the car did look like an itinerant tinker's van, but it was ship-shape and the baggage sat firm ; and at eleven o'clock we rolled out of the yard and drew up outside the Turf Club door for a final photograph.

And then at last we were away. And the rain still poured. Overnight I had promised by all that was holy that on no account would we leave without bidding an official farewell to Mohamed Mohamed Omar ; and when we reached his back alley the whole quartér was waiting for us—all the staff, masses of odd chauffeurs, the man who had made the fitting

for our spare wheel, the man who had made the side curtains, the man who had sprung the cushion for our front seat, an army of guttersnipes, a troop of beggars, and a fair sprinkling of very dilapidated gentlemen who wished to sell us nuts and cakes to reinforce our commissariat. It was all the greatest fun. Some gave us letters—all very insufficiently addressed—to long-lost friends in Iraq and Persia ; everybody gave us advice ; everybody wanted to know what everything in the car was ; and Mohamed Mohamed himself took me mysteriously aside and pressed £10 into my hand to buy a Shiraz carpet which he had promised his wife. Then a photograph which the rain ruined ; and finally, just as we were re-embarking for departure, an omen which Mohamed Mohamed Omar said could not be bettered. The clouds suddenly vanished into the west and Egypt smiled again ; and in bright sunshine we were away at last to Heliopolis, and then off into the desert proper, bowling down the road to Suez.

It was bitterly cold, as we were driving into the teeth of the wind, and we put on our heavy coats ; but with the curtains down we were snug and tidy, and as mile after mile slipped behind us, we felt all the thrill of the open road. At first there were signs of the remains of old war camps—heaps of tins and disused junk ; and then the emptiness of the desert opened before us—a brown desert of pebbles and dark outcrop with high hills in the distance to the south, deep blue against a racing sky. Gradually the day warmed and the sun shone ever brighter ; and after a late lunch we were fifty miles out of Cairo, and by four o'clock, with our shadows running ever longer before us, we reached the railway camp, twenty miles from Suez, where we were to spend the night with an old friend who was in charge of the construction of the new Cairo-Suez Railway which was being rebuilt on part of the alignment of the old line made for Ismail the Magnificent by the son of Robert Stephenson who built the "Rocket".

We had told our host that all we would need would be an empty tent to give us practice in laying out our gear ; and to our content both of us were most efficient, and in a quarter of an hour our beds, tables, washstands, lamps and chairs were all out and in order, and the tent was superbly furnished.

The rest of the evening was sheer delight. When the sun went down, the wind died away and the silence of the desert ebbed up to us like a tide ; and later in our host's tent he told us stories of his Central American adventures which were far better than all Rider Haggard's romances. He had

trailed from Texas to Peru, normally as an engineer, but as often as not as a generalissimo in one of the revolutions or counter-revolutions which are quite the ordinary thing in Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. Once he had been foolish enough to ally himself to a party which was eventually defeated; and his cavalry, mounted on anything from horses and mules to bullocks, true to the best Central American traditions, ran away as soon as they discovered that their side was not winning easily. He himself was wounded with a pickaxe, made prisoner, and condemned to be shot as a rebel; and a few hours later he was standing against a wall while a platoon of soldiers shoved enormous bullets into their rifles. But while there is life there is hope. A sergeant approached to bandage his eyes. He refused with a terrific roar. "I am an Englishman," he said, "and my word is the word of an Englishman, and this is my last word! You have nothing against me, and you are going to murder me; but I swear—and you know what an Englishman's oath means—that when I am dead I will haunt you all your days; and when you die, I will come down to Hell where you will be, and I will brand you with a white-hot iron and hold your head in the infernal fires, and you will roast for ever and ever! Now shoot!" The sergeant nearly died of fright. He told the men to unload at once and marched my friend back to the cells, where the other prisoners who were awaiting their turn in front of the firing squad, thought that he was a ghost returned from the dead, and started howling and crossing themselves. That night he and his fellows in the cells tore up the planks of their floor and dropped down into an alligator pool underneath, and swam unscathed to a small headland opposite, where they found a boat and put to sea. And so scared was the sergeant of the Englishman's curse that, although the alarm was given at once and everybody knew that the only way of escape was across the pool, he marched his men slick in the opposite direction towards some mountains where, he said, there was much more chance of intercepting the enemies of his Fatherland.

That was but one of many stories. There were others of hold-ups, dynamite plots, and kidnapping, and the evening passed in an exciting flash, and before I knew it it was eleven o'clock and time for bed. Outside it was absolutely still, no wind at all, and only the distant bark of a pi-dog and a far-away murmur of Arab voices talking in a tent which stood up gaunt under the moon. It was lovely, and I felt very glad to be away at last.

But we had a tiresome night, the two of us ; for, though our tent was warm and our beds comfortable, neither slept well. The reason was that I snored, and when Roy woke me up I was unreasonably peevish, while his feelings towards me were positively murderous as he lay wide-eyed awake listening to me noisily enjoying myself, lying on my back with my mouth wide open. If ever I have a wife, I hope she snores. Then we shall be all square.

Next morning we went out with our host on his early-morning tour of inspection. It was bitterly cold, but fresh and clean, and I felt my lungs bursting with the strong morning air ; and a mile and a half north of the camp we found the men at work. We heard them long before we saw them. They were drilling holes for the blasting of a cutting, and every hole was made by a team of five, clustered like monkeys on a stick round a terrific iron ram which they lifted all together and then let drop with a resounding thud. But every time they lifted the five gave the ram a simultaneous twist with their wrists, so that the point fell in a new place. And, of course, they worked to music—Gregorian music. First came the solo, a line of it, and then the refrain, loud and crisp. And this is what they sang :

"To-morrow will be pay-day. *Ya Mohamed, Ya Khalil.*

"Be careful, the Boss is watching. *Ya Mohamed, Ya Khalil.*

"The Boss's wife is wearing a white dress. *Ya Mohamed, Ya Khalil.*

"Who are the strangers with him ? *Ya Mohamed, Ya Khalil.*"

Yards and yards of it, interrupted by shouts of laughter when the soloist produced some particularly obscene comment on life by way of a variation of patter. And the work went with a swing which only the Saidi labourer from Upper Egypt can attain. The groups were perhaps five yards apart, and in the narrow cutting the whole lot looked just like clothes boiling in a wash-tub, bubbling up and bubbling down tirelessly. And if ever men appeared to be enjoying what must be a very boring job, those Saidis were the men. When the holes were bored, the time came for the blasting, and the charges were laid and everyone retired to a healthy distance—I to a very healthy distance. And in due course the balloon went up, and all the Saidis shouted and jumped and said that it was the grandest explosion they had ever known. Personally I was only relieved that no fallen rock had come my way, and I was thankful to be back in camp, safe from the machinations of men.

But over breakfast life became rather ghoulish. A man had been killed on the work the previous day owing to his carelessness in shunting, and two Government doctors—a fat Egyptian and a sleek, olive-coloured Syrian—had arrived to discuss coroners' courts, post-mortems, and other depressing topics. What they decided I do not know, but after breakfast they drove away to Suez in a hired taxi of their own. We followed half an hour later, but twenty minutes out from the camp we overtook the taxi. Water poured from its radiator, two tyres were punctured, and it had no petrol. How that taxi-man ever imagined that he would get to Suez without petrol, I don't know. So we had to be Good Samaritans ; and, after a rather apprehensive look at the Egyptian's colossal bulk, I invited the two of them and their servant to stow themselves somehow in the back of the lorry, saying that we would do our best to get them to Suez in time to catch their train for Ismailia.

We reached the outskirts of the town safely, but then misfortune assailed us. The track was narrow and we had to overtake an ass-cart, and unfortunately miscalculated our width and struck its wheels with a petrol box nailed on to one side of the body in which was stowed all our cooking utensils and lamps and Flit and a tin full of eggs. The fat Egyptian, who was using the top of the petrol box as a footstool, first realized the inevitability of a collision. He gave a loud scream of terror, which was at once drowned by a noise like the crash of a hundred empty milk-cans in a station ; and when I looked behind the road was littered wholesale with hardware, and when I looked inside the rumble, there was the Egyptian flat on his back and praying like an escape of steam with his feet pawing the roof. We stopped, of course ; but apparently the ass-cart was undamaged and the driver was more than satisfied with five piastres to compensate for the shock to his ass. And, to our relief, our casualties were also surprisingly insignificant—one kettle-lid dented, one lamp-glass out of four broken, the Flit squirt squashed flat, and—most marvellous of all—only four eggs out of the dozen were smashed. We gathered the remains at full speed, as time was short if the doctors were to catch their train ; but five minutes later, in Suez, we all but ran into a chain stretched across the road and were called upon to pay municipal *octroi*. We said no. We had only come into Suez to do a good turn to the Egyptian Government whose doctors would otherwise miss their train, and already our kindness had cost us four eggs. When the

policemen heard our story of the ass-cart, it tickled them so much that they waved us on with loud shouts of laughter, and our two passengers did just catch their train. The Syrian's good-bye was picturesque. "Ill luck in the morning means good luck is dawning. You will accomplish your journey safely." A very nice man.

Outside the station we quickly recruited convenient street scallywags to help us repair the results of our collision. One took the kettle-lid and the Flit squirt to the ironmonger, and another knew where we could get a new petrol box ; and then, while we were waiting, suddenly there stepped out of the middle of the inevitable crowd a jolly chauffeur from Cairo with one of our canvas water-carriers in his hand. He told us that he had picked it up on the road from Cairo the day before, and, spotting other similar carriers on our lorry, he thought it must be ours. We did not even know we had lost it, and I gave him a good tip for his honesty. Good luck *was* dawning.

The next incident was the arrival of a policeman—a Maltee—on a motor-bicycle with obvious intention to arrest or at any rate detain us. Apparently after the police at the *octroi* had recovered from their giggles over the ass-cart, they had come to the conclusion that it was all a ramp and had put the wheels of action into gear. The result was the policeman ; and as soon as the new petrol box was in position, he ordered us brusquely back to the police station. It was a scream. No one knew what to do next, and everyone blamed everyone else ; the noise was terrific, and it looked as though we might be there for ever, until I had a brainwave. If they didn't know what to do, perhaps I could help them. I would write, then and now, a report on my offence to be submitted to headquarters. All agreed thankfully, and some time next day, by which time we were safely in Sinai, I hope I brought a fleeting smile to the lips of the Governor of Suez with my very flippant account of our impingement on the ass-cart.



THE START FROM CAIRO



THE SUEZ CANAL

"WE WERE ON SOLID GROUND WHILE THE MALOJA 'FLOATED' SOME FEET HIGHER THAN US ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANAL BANK."

CHAPTER IV

INTO SINAI

THE Kubri ferry across the Canal lies six miles north of Suez, but happily for us—for, as a result of the ass-cart, we were already hours behind our schedule—the pontoon was on our bank, and by one o'clock we were safely across and in Sinai proper. There, waiting to cross into Egypt, stood an extremely battered touring car which contained a solitary man—obviously a European. He proved to be a Czechoslovak, and his total kit, so far as I could see, was a tousel of blankets in the back seat, a primus stove and a saucepan. He told me quite casually that he had been motoring in Arabia and was due to carry on to Tunis and Algeria; and when I wished him good luck, he replied piously, "*Gott mit uns.*" Then he saluted awkwardly and rolled down on to the pontoon.

While I had been talking to him, I had noticed that an Egyptian sergeant of colossal girth had been fidgeting in the offing, and when I was free, he asked for a lift to El Shatt opposite Suez. He said that he was tired of his camel and had a carbuncle on his riding section. But his weight deterred me, especially as I could see that the much lighter Czechoslovak car had scored our sandy waterlogged track ahead with ruts inches deep. So I shook my head, whereupon the corporal with him let out a huge guffaw. The sergeant frowned ferociously. But he had been given away. He was merely lazy, and the carbuncle was only a try-on, so I had no qualms of conscience. As a matter of fact the next half-hour fully justified my fears about extra weight. The track ran alongside but below the level of the Canal, and the going was treacherously soft and difficult, and twice we had to stop as the car boiled. One stop was rather fun. The P. & O. *Maloja*, bound north for Port Said and England, was passing us; and there we were on solid ground while she floated some feet higher than us on the other side of the canal bank. That Canal is a very wonderful thing.

We reached El Shatt at half past one and reported to a sergeant of the Frontier District Administration who promised to telephone our movements to Nekhl, where we were to spend the night. He also volunteered the information that we would be there easily in three and a half hours. So, with high hopes of an early night, we turned our backs on the Canal and swung out into the east across a great empty undulating vista of yellow-pink sand. We saw one gazelle, and later, while we were twisting among a long range of sand-hills, a single camel led by a rolling bundle of clothes. The man—it was a man—was so swathed against the wind and the sand which was driving straight into his face, that he neither heard nor saw us, and in the end we had to sound our horn. I can't say how silly it was to hoot in such emptiness. The camel entirely agreed. He gave a terrific bound and, dragging his master pell-mell through the sand, started cantering off nowhere. But we could not stop to apologize. We were in second gear, slipping and labouring in a three-hundred-yard-long drift of white powdery sand, where to stop would have meant to stick.

So on we roared over another range of sandhills, to see, dead ahead, the grim rampart of Sinai's westernmost mountains. We were searching for the gap which would be our Mitlah Pass, when suddenly the track switched abruptly downhill into the north, and back we were again in bad sand, toiling and boiling for another twenty minutes in bottom gear. And then gradually we began to climb in earnest, twisting this way and that among great smooth-sided yellow hills covered with brown rocks and pebbles, which looked just like chocolate flakes dusted over coffee ices ; and at half past three we were at last on the top of the Pass and in the heart of the mountains. Away to the south one range succeeded another—high, steep ramparts fluted like organ pipes, and ending in sheer flatness which stood out almost artificially against the pale blue sky. And everywhere absolute, almost deadening silence, broken only by the roar of the car as it switchbacked uphill, downhill, round corners and back again, to plunge at last into a long steep *wadi* and dreadful country which looked as though it was made of plaster-of-Paris, fashioned by a crazy sculptor. Everything was dead and dusty. We saw one shepherd and two Bedouin with a camel ; but both man and beast hid as we passed. We were in a land where every man's hand is against every man.

By this time our shadow was lengthening before us, and,



INTO SINAI

"WE TURNED OUR BACKS ON THE CANAL, AND SWUNG OUT INTO THE EAST ACROSS A GREAT EMPTY UNDULATING VISTA OF YELLOW-PINK SAND"



THE SANDS OF SINAI
“SLIPPING AND LABOURING IN WHITE POWDERY SAND, WHERE TO STOP WOULD HAVE MEANT TO STICK”

although the three and a half hours of the Frontier District's Sergeant were wellnigh spent, from the map we were not yet half-way to Nekhl. Arabs may be all right to calculate camel time, but when it comes to motors, never trust them. Indeed, twilight was almost on us when we came to the junction where the new road which we had followed joins the old Darb el Haj—the Pilgrims' Way—from Egypt to Akaba. It was wide and looked easy and convenient; but appearances were entirely deceptive. For the remainder of the way to Nekhl we plugged drearily across what seemed to be an endless spillway, which in the rains carries the water from the mountains of the south down to the Great Central Wadis. It was as rough as the Sahara at its worst, with now a spell of red pebbly surface streaked with tiny, almost invisible but spring-shattering runnels: now with vast stretches of white-caked lime-soil with a surface rather like petrified tapioca. The best we did was twelve miles an hour, and of course we were still miles from Nekhl when night fell. And with our lights on we had the inevitable desert illusion of snaking our way along a vilely kept avenue with the darkness towering over our heads on either side like overhanging trees. But the road was not difficult to find, and it was the only road, and it led to Nekhl. So in great spirit we planned out our evening meal, and every now and then there would be the excitement of some artificial formation of limestone outcrop which, in the glare of our lights, looked just like a wall and made us think we had arrived. Indeed, in the end, when at last the walls of Nekhl Fort did appear, we hardly believed our eyes.

And then a quarter of an hour of eerie romance. The place looked a deserted city—not a light, not a sound—and we had cruised round two faces of the wall before our lamps picked out the whiteness of a tapering minaret. We turned towards it through a narrow gap between two high walls and sounded our horn and waited. Dead silence. We hooted again; and then, as from a great distance, we heard the sound of a discreet cough and a pattering of naked feet across the sand. It was Musallem, the keeper of the Egyptian Government Rest House, and after greeting me as a Pasha—which I liked very much—he mounted the running-board and guided us with terrific deference round the Mosque, beyond which we drew up opposite a huge gate set in a high blind mud-brick wall. The gate opened on to a courtyard, and within we found true Arab hospitality. One candle burned under the verandah, another in the hall; and beyond there was a lamp and a

roaring fire in an excellent room where we could eat in comfort. Then callers—the local telephone operator, who looked exactly like one of the thieves in Ali Baba, and the *tomergi* (medical officer) of Nekhl, aged seventeen, with a pharmacy diploma on the strength of which he ministers to the ills of the townfolk. The two of them volunteered to help Roy unload the car, while Musallem and I departed to the kitchen to do a bit of housekeeping. We had a grand meal, bovril, four tinned sausages and six eggs mashed up and fried on a pan, and a tin of fruit and butter and biscuits. The butter was a triumph. Three days before leaving Cairo I had bought a pound and had had it divided up into sixteen sections, each of an ounce; each ounce was then done up in paper and the sixteen packages were then reassembled and put into cold-storage for three days. As a result we had real butter and not melted train oil.

After supper, while Roy wrote up the log, I, with the excuse of more housekeeping, retired for a chat with Musallem. He was dying for a gossip, and told me that his was a dull life and that he was glad to have visitors for a night. Nekhl had been a gay place, he said, when the pilgrims used to come on camels; but now there were no pilgrims and “your cars arrive *zai el howa* [like the wind] and depart *zai el howa*”. As we chatted I measured out the Quaker oats for our breakfast and put it to soak in a saucepan of water, which I drew from our own tanks. It was sweet Cairo water, and Musallem eyed it longingly. For Nekhl water is bitter and brackish. So I gave him four gallons for himself, and he was quite as pleased as I would have been with a tip of a hundred pounds. And then to bed, but not in the living-room. I had discovered a second chamber where I could snore undisturbed. So Roy, who had driven magnificently over all the difficult going, was rewarded with a proper night with the heat of the fire to warm him and all around the aroma which still persisted from the sausage-and-egg mash.

Next morning I was awakened by a discreet cough from Musallem. In accordance with my overnight instructions he had put the Quaker oats to boil. But, he said, it still looked like mud and dirty water. How could it ever make food for the Pasha? I told him to go on boiling and he would see, and ten minutes later, when I was half-way through my shaving, in he rushed full of excitement to say that a miracle had happened to the sawdust and what was he to do next? So we had grand porridge and more sausage and mash, and then arrived the *tomergi* to say that he was going on leave and

would we run him over to El Arish. He spoke of El Arish as a week-ending; subaltern will speak of London. I said, "Certainly"; and then he coughed. "I have a little luggage, sir," he said; and in five minutes he was back with a trunk like an Ark. However, it contained apparently nothing at all, and stowed away quite comfortably with the rest of our gear, and there were smiles all round. Then appeared Ali Baba to ask if he might be my guide round the town. I explained that I wanted to take photographs in panorama, whereupon he blithely invited me to enter the Mosque and climb the minaret. I demurred. "Is not that forbidden to a *giaour* (unbeliever)?" "*Maaleesh* [never mind], *ya Pasha*," he replied. "To-day you will be one of us." So up went the two of us round a spiral staircase barely wide enough for our shoulders, and at last stood high above the town on the *muezzin's* platform. The place looked just like Herculaneum from the air—a dead city with destruction and desolation everywhere; and, according to Ali Baba, only thirteen families now lived in the town which in its day had sheltered a floating pilgrim population numbered in tens of thousands. The fort alone was in decent repair, but beyond it the great pilgrim water tanks were sadly silted up, and even the Mosque seemed derelict. The glory had indeed departed.

While I toured, Roy and the *tomergi* and Musallem had packed the car beautifully; but when the time came for us to leave, and I offered Musallem a tip, he retreated like a shying filly. Had he not already been sufficiently honoured by our presence? So instead I left, as a present to all Nekhl, nine oranges, three pounds of rice, and two pounds of sugar. It was a red-letter day for the desert town; for, of course, there are no shops in Nekhl.

CHAPTER V

EL ARISH

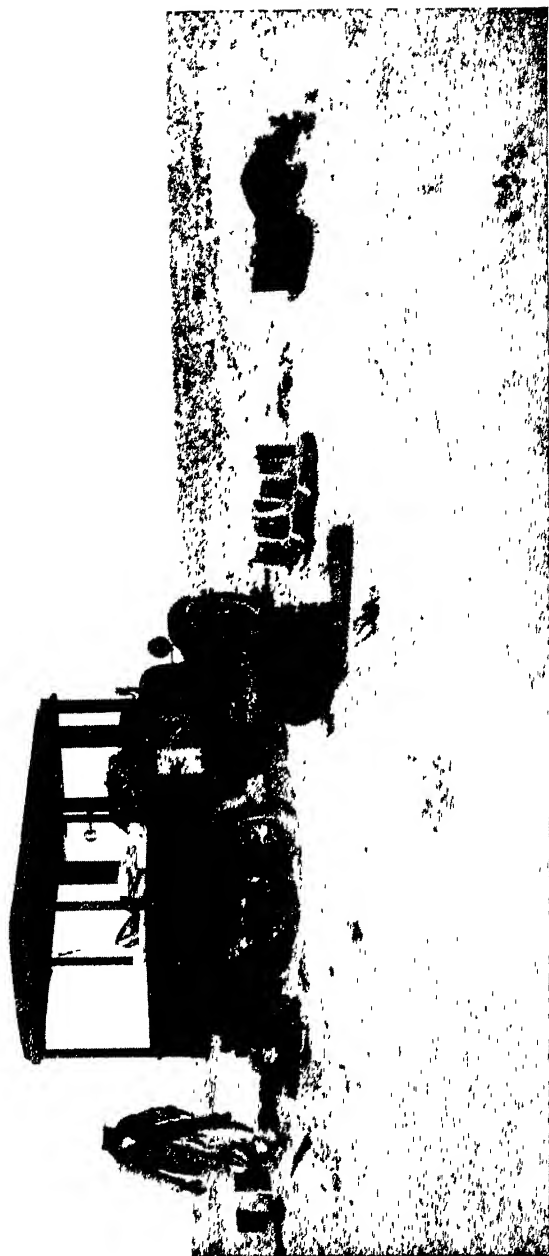
NORTH of Nekhl we found wide hungry stretches of yellow marl leading up to squat rocky hills with passes through them designed not for motors but for camels ; then a spasm of good firm running ; and then a vast *wadi* undermined by the recent rains, which quivered under us like a water-bed. Just past it we met two camel policemen returning to Nekhl from a three-days' patrol after drug-traffickers from Palestine into Egypt. They looked like sacks of clothing, and were slung back, front and sides with swinging water-bottles ; but they were dead beat, and their eyes, which was all we could see of their faces, were red as coals from exposure, and, after greetings, they lumbered away to Nekhl and sleep. Then another vast *wadi*—the Wadi Bruk—and another quaking passage. But we kept on steadily and in two hours had covered forty miles without much trouble or discomfort.

But the last twenty miles before reaching Bir Hassana, where we were to lunch, took us over an hour and a half. From the sand we plunged into a horrid limestone depression called the White Ridges. Our road ran hither and thither between tall smooth humps and pillars which looked like mountains on the moon or ghostly stalagmites ; the noonday sun was at its hottest ; and in the depression we were out of the wind, and the heat and glare of the lime contracted our eyeballs to pin-pricks and made our throats and tongues feel like leather. Thank goodness we had the *tomergi* with us. The ground was as hard as iron and rough as a choppy sea ; no tracks were visible to our eyes : but where we were blind, he could see ; and after an hour of real torture he guided us safely through.

Half an hour later we topped a rise, and below us lay a wide sun-scorched valley, brown and shimmering in the heat ; and far away, floating grotesquely in a mirage, we made out masoned houses and one tree. Bir Hassana was an outpost of the Turkish advance on the Canal early in the war, and they and their German masters *did* build well. But their



A SINAI DESERT LANDSCAPE



SANDBOGGED IN SINAI

houses, stone-built and solid, are to-day empty shells—no roofs—for wood is gold in Sinai—and windows gaping like sightless eyes. Somehow terribly futile.

Like Nekhl, it has a good rest-house and a good rest-house keeper, and we ate well, though hastily; for as usual we were behind our timetable, and if we were to reach our host at El Arish when we had promised, we could not afford to dally over food. So half an hour later we were off again into the north-east, and, for my sins, I was at the wheel. For the first ten miles we followed the old Turkish war-road. All its top dressing is gone and only the boulder foundations remain, and for a miserable three-quarters of an hour we popped about like herrings on the Griddle-Oh. And when the car popped, my foot on the accelerator popped too, with the result that our advance was a series of shameful staccato bounds. I was humiliated. But worse was to come. On leaving the Turkish road to switch due north to El Arish, we were faced with cruel stuff, soft and treacherous and in places not unlike the Sahara; and at once I felt it in my bones that it was only a question of time before I would bog us all in a drift. I was quite right. Almost before I knew it I had trapped myself in a sort of amphitheatre of horrid little sandhills. I couldn't stop, as I was afraid we would stick, and in a panic of desperation chose what looked to be the most innocuous of the bunkers ahead and went for it as hard as I could. It was an uphill carry of some seventy yards, and to my surprise I worked the gears beautifully; but ten yards from safety the wheels began to spin aimlessly and we were stuck. Then for twenty minutes we foolishly tried half-measures to extricate ourselves. All that happened was that we buried the wheels hub-deep. And only then did we get down to what we ought to have done in the first place. We off-loaded everything, rebuilt the track under the back wheels, and then the *tomergi* and I put our shoulders against the tailboard like a pair of elephants, while Roy slammed in our bottom gear. The car gave a mighty heave, shivered, staggered, and at last, with the wheels spinning like tops, lumbered out over those beastly ten yards to safety. In another ten minutes disaster threatened us again; but this time the *tomergi* and I—Roy had wisely returned to the wheel—were out and pushing before the gears ran out; and we survived. One lives and learns.

We were now, of course, miles and hours behind our timetable; but the worst was nearly over, and at four o'clock we were at last out in firm rocky country skirting the eastern

cliff of the Gebel Hilal, which, according to some, is the mountain where God gave Moses the Tablets of the Law. The sun was sinking and we were hurrying on in the cold shadow of the mountain, when we unexpectedly came on some Bedouin preparing their evening meal in front of their brown camel-hair tents. We were too pressed to accept their offer of coffee, but they cheered us up with the news that El Arish was only an hour and a half away. But theirs again was Arab reckoning. Night fell, and with our lights on we were once more in the illusion of an avenue with its overhanging trees; and still no El Arish. Suddenly ahead we spotted a welcome light—a great furze fire silhouetting two Arab policemen jumping about like elves to attract our attention. We drew up thankfully and asked them to guide us to our host's house. They stared blankly. "El Arish?" they said. "This is not El Arish. This is Magdeba, and you have another hour and a half to go. But we expected you, and you are to ring up the Pasha at El Arish to say when you will arrive."

The telephone was in a tiny hovel, smoke-stained and grimy, and before we reached it, we heard it. The police sergeant was speaking to El Arish. His methods were violent—twiddle and roar, twiddle and roar; but just as I arrived he got through. Then, instead of giving word of our movements, he went off into a torrent of abuse at the operator about the rottenness of the service. I might have been in London. The operator at the other end, however, gave him quite as good as he got, and finally reduced the sergeant to such rage that in his excitement he pulled the receiver off the machine. So that that call was done. However, the corporal had a handy kitchen knife, and with it they repaired the damage, and soon we were off again: twiddle and roar, twiddle and roar. After another five minutes the saucy operator at El Arish condescended to answer. They would send a car out to guide us; dinner would be ready when we arrived; and all was well. That night I slept between linen sheets with an electric lamp to read by and a box of biscuits by my hand; and I thought of poor Musallem at Nekhl and hoped he was enjoying our sugar and rice.

El Arish is the headquarters of Government in Sinai, and throughout the Peninsula our host is known as *Abu Bakht* (The Father of Good Fortune). That means achievement. For Arabs, among themselves, do not hurl bouquets at Europeans, who are mostly too enthusiastic for their conservative temperaments. But if this enthusiasm lines their

pockets, it is tolerated—even mildly approved. Hence "The Father of Good Fortune".

In a country where water is gold, *Abu Bakht* has built storage tanks and thousands of acres of desert are coming under cultivation and bringing fat profits to desert dwellers. Sinai also lacks trees, and the story of *Abu Bakht's* afforestation of El Arish is delicious. When he arrived, he arranged for a supply of saplings—a free issue to all and sundry. But there had never been tree-planting in Sinai and therefore there could never be tree-planting in Sinai. That was normal Arab reasoning. But the Arishi Arabs could not be rude to the new Pasha. He was well meaning, though a fool. So they took his free trees, planted them and neglected them, and they died. But *Abu Bakht* also took some trees for his garden and planted them and tended them, and they lived. And in due course the sceptical Arab saw oranges in the Pasha's garden and shade where before the sun had beaten relentlessly. But *Abu Bakht* said nothing, and the years passed. The day we arrived coincided with the arrival of a second free consignment of saplings ; and as I walked with him during the morning through the town, first one Arab and then another approached him with the utmost deference and asked for a share of the booty. They also wanted oranges and shade in their gardens.

And after trees, eggs. El Arish eggs in other days, like the Egyptian variety, were about the size of pigeons' eggs, and the El Arish fowl was a disgrace to any breed. So *Abu Bakht* got sittings from England and hatched them ; and when he received a present of a basket of dates from an Arab friend, he would reply with the gift of a young cock for the Arab's farmyard. When we were leaving I bought a dozen eggs in the town. They were brown, which you never see in Egypt, and they were twice the size of the old pigeon variety. Well done, *Abu Bakht*.

The town itself is clean and white, a blend of the Oriental and the Mediterranean and happily free from any Levantine taint ; and down on the seashore at the mouth of the Wadi Arish—the Biblical River of Egypt—we might have been on a South Sea island. The sea rolled up to a white shore in long even combers ; the palm trees, growing almost in the water, stood out tall and feathery against a perfect sunset ; and everywhere there was the sound of cooing doves. We loved El Arish and *Abu Bakht*.

From El Arish we struck direct into Palestine—Delta country with vast ironbound mud-flats which in rain would

hold up any car, but which we found as tempting as Daytona Beach. An hour out we overtook two wild-looking Bedouin who wanted lifts; but no sooner were they safely settled in the rumble than both of them from the recesses of their filthy clothes produced enormous hatchets, the blades of which they proceeded to test on their thumbs with soft sounds of approval. We naturally were alarmed, and showed it, whereupon the two burst into uproarious laughter. "Have no fears," they said. "We are only wood-cutters." We accepted their assurances nervously, having no idea how wood-cutting could be a profession in a country where there is about one tree to every hundred miles. However, the wood-cutters enjoyed themselves greatly, especially when we opened out the car across a mud-flat and attained, for us, the marvellous speed of thirty miles per hour. They gasped for breath and their eyes poured with tears, and I heard them gasping, "*Kwies*" ("Good"). When they got their breath back, they were curiosity itself. Did every Englishman have a motor? Why did we wear ties? How were our boots laced? But when I offered them cigarettes they surprisingly refused. However, they took the cigarette card, and, after looking at it upside down for a bit, suddenly got it right way up and realized that it was a picture of a battleship. "Is it English," they asked, "like the aeroplane we saw over El Arish this morning?" I said it was, and asked if either had ever been on the sea. "God forbid," they both said in unison. "Never on the sea, and never in the air. Your motor, perhaps, yes; but after all, what is better than a camel, unless it is our own legs?" There was a pause and they seemed to be ruminating; and then one of them nodded to the other. "After all," he said, "one's own legs are best in the long run." Meanwhile we were going grandly for us, and, having passed Magdeba, where our friend the sergeant waved to us and then hastened into his hovel to start "*Twiddle and Roar*" to tell Al Arish the news, we dropped our two friends, and out they bounced, hatchets and all. The only features in an otherwise absolutely empty landscape were three dreary stunted shrubs. Their days were obviously numbered.

By this time we had left the mud-pans behind us and were out in deep hummocky country sloping gradually up to Gebel Hilal, where we switched east, a short cut to rejoin the awful Turkish military road from Bir Hassana into Palestine which we had bumped over two days before. Then a wide valley of hot desolation, paved with reddish-brown volcanic gravel; then a long range of glaring hills and shallow pass where we

flushed a covey of sand grouse ; and at last the brazen plain of Kosseima, in the middle of which we rejoined the Turkish road. And so, bumping and bouncing, we made our way to the rest-house in its grove of *Abu Bakht's* eucalyptus trees, and, waiting for us on the step, a sergeant-major, very smart and surprisingly European looking—perhaps he had some blood of Baldwin's crusaders or Napoleon's guard in his veins—and the rest-house keeper, who at once placed himself entirely at the disposal of the two distinguished Pashas. He helped us to cook our lunch, and we boiled eggs. He cooked under my supervision ; and when I thought the eggs had been long enough in the water, I told him to take them out. His obedience was almost terrifying. He plunged his hand four times into the boiling water to retrieve the four eggs.

Kosseima was the headquarters of the Turkish army for the advance on the Canal, and after lunch, escorted by the good-looking sergeant-major, we crossed what was the old war railway. The lines are gone ; the station is a roofless wreck ; and all that remains of the water-tanks are their concrete sub-structures. In 1915 the place was a hive of energy. War is a ghastly waste. Five miles beyond the railway there suddenly opened before us a valley of vivid green—so green that I felt just as the Israelites must have felt when they cleared the desert and saw the fields of the Promised Land. The desert does make one appreciate colour. This was *Abu Bakht* again. He had found a huge derelict masoned tank which may have been built by the Romans ; he cleared it, fed a wandering spring back into it, and below it we took our tea in a beautiful garden as the guest of the Egyptian Government Inspector in charge of the place. He had sweet-peas, vegetables of all kinds in tiny irrigated plots, flowering-shrubs, almonds, bananas, dates, pears, and oranges ; and to protect them all a towering wall of well-grown eucalyptus. I asked him how he liked his job. "Well enough," he said, "but I live in Cairo." "And how does this compare with Cairo ?" He looked at me as though he thought I was mad. "Cairo is the best place in the world," he replied, just as a keeper of an outpost of the British Empire will talk of London.

Our evening in the rest-house was perfect peace, but in the middle of the night I had to get up to close the shutters of my room. The wind was blowing hard from the west, and a huge black cloud shaped like a crocodile's head with its jaws wide agape was slowly advancing at the stars, swallowing them one by one. It boded ill for the morrow.

CHAPTER VI

FROM DESERT TO SOWN

NEXT day was our last in Sinai, and a wild slashing wind from the west bade us be gone. Swishing clouds of dust completely blotted the landscape ; the sun was but a yellow ball in a sickly sky ; and as we bumped our weary way towards the frontier, the noise of the storm almost drowned the rattle of our tin cans in the rumble. I don't know when or where we crossed into Palestine, but gradually we knew we were there. The hills were no longer crags, the slopes were no longer ramparts, and the country, though gloomy to a degree, had signs of vegetation. But most eloquent of all were the goats and sheep. Not one had we seen in Sinai, save in the oases, but here on the hillsides flocks were grazing, head to tail, over the scanty grasses, their shepherds standing near by looking like so many Davids. We had left the desert for the sown.

And in another half an hour we were officially in Palestine. The frontier town is El Auja—yet another Turkish headquarters of their Sinai adventure ; and here again on all sides was the wreckage of war. But none has been used to build the New Palestinian Frontier Offices. Far away through the dust we saw first red-tiled roofs almost pink with newness, and beyond them the tall masts of the wireless station. A pleasant Palestinian policeman dressed in a uniform which is a compromise between a marine's kit and Mustafa Kemal's campaigning outfit, brought us to the rest-house ; and over lunch we were visited by the Control Officer, who told us that our passports must be stamped at Beersheba. He asked for our names so that he could telegraph them ahead. "And," he added, "please write in block capitals, as our operator is only a beginner." So we were to be announced officially ; and in fine fettle, and reinforced by close instructions as to the road we must follow, we rolled out into the north.

But, if possible, the afternoon was wilder than the morning. The wind howled ; the horizon was a cloud of dust and sand ;

and as we checked one landmark after another on our map, we wondered at the quality of the road, which we had been assured was excellent. In places it was fair ; but then we would come to an unbridged *wadi* with horrid steep banks and a sickeningly yielding bed, which taxed Roy and the car equally. And always on one side or the other of our track was the tragic ruin of the old Turkish railway. But signs of cultivation persisted, and goats and sheep became more and more frequent, and we *were* going in the right direction.

After a while I took the wheel, and, though I negotiated my *wadis* without incident, I ended of course in a second stick. We had rounded a bright red hill, opening into a valley at the end of which was another wireless station and a village, and our track, sloping easily down a charming gradient, tempted me to speed. But the storm had drifted two feet of bright red sand right across our way, and I was in it before I had time even to change down a gear. Once again I had betrayed my inefficiency. But this time there were no half-measures. We put four layers of sacks under each back wheel, I pushed behind and Roy worked the gears beautifully, and inch by inch we disengaged ourselves. But I drove no more. At the village two policemen asked us in astonishment where we had come from. "That track has been condemned for years," they said. "You have been on the wrong road for hours." So much for maps and our map-reading.

And so on into the north, and on all sides more and more cultivation and flocks. But just before we reached Beersheba itself down came the rain in sheets. It was high prairie country, rather like Salisbury Plain, and I found myself wishing very much that there would be a Savernake Arms Hotel at the end where I could get a gin and ginger wine to melt the cold which was freezing my marrow. But Beersheba is no Savernake. We entered by the same line which the Australian mounted troops took in 1917. First we passed a eucalyptus garden where on the morning of the day of the capture I had bivouacked with the Leinsters ; then we crossed the Wadi Saba and climbed up to the wells where all through the long day of October 30th, 1917, watched by a German Taube from a height of 10,000 feet, we had loaded camels with water for the 53rd Division at Kwelfieh ; then up the wide main street which fifteen years before had seemed so civilized after months spent in the sand-dunes of Rafa ; and finally to the District Commissioner's Office, where we duly reported ourselves for passport formalities.

A British inspector dealt with us, but when we asked him if we could use the rest-house for the night he demurred awkwardly. Two other visitors, he explained, had been reported from Auja; by their names he thought they were Americans; and the accommodation was very limited. We said that we had not seen or heard of anybody else on the road or in Sinai, and what were their names. "Mr. Theodor and Mr. Woolworth." We burst out laughing. Our block capitals after all had been too much for the beginner at El Auja.

The rest-house was a droll little cabin in charge of an old Turk who looked exactly like Sultan Rashad in his decline. He was a monument of slovenly dirt, and his rest-house was absolutely in keeping. In the living-room was a cupboard with three shelves. On the middle shelf were the three-days-old remains of a former tenant's meal. On the top shelf dirty linen was mixed with dirty knives and forks. The bottom shelf was crammed with enough toilet rolls to stock a hospital for months. And the smell was overpowering. But it was easily eclipsed by the stench of the kitchen. It was like an old iron store; everything was thick in grease and soot. When we suggested eggs on a pan, the Sultan swabbed the dish with his filthy sleeve, and when we asked for tea, he emptied about a quarter of a pound of stale tea leaves out of a cracked teapot. But, far from being disconcerted, he was querulous. I enlisted his help to lay the table. "Of a truth," he said, "you English require a fool's mount of spoons and forks before you will eat. Are you not hungry? Why then all this delay?" When we left next morning he of course asked me for a written testimonial which he wished to offer to the District Commissioner with the suggestion of a rise in pay.

It is just sixty miles from Beersheba to Jerusalem, and we planned to lunch in the Holy City. Luckily for us, the day was a great improvement on its predecessor, and by the time we entered the Judean Hills, the sun was high and the wind was fresh and keen, and there was green everywhere—olive trees on the stony hillsides and in the valley the earliest sproutings of the spring harvest. I was strangely elated by the prospect of Jerusalem ahead; but Roy was very silent. I had snored like a grampus in the Beersheba rest-house and he had had a wretched night; and, feeling guilty and in order to ease tension, I attempted light conversation.

"Tell me," I began hopefully, "if you were a free man where would you like to live?"

He yawned.

"Not in Beersheba, anyhow."

I laughed gaily, though somewhat nervously.

"Good gracious, no. But seriously, where would you like to live?"

"Do you mean live alone [a nasty dig that], or just live?"

"Oh, just live."

He thought for two minutes.

"England or Canada," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I like good roads and my own language."

"Yes," I answered. "Perhaps you're right, but I think I would be bored that way. If I were free I would like to live in Ireland or Palestine."

"Good Lord! Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I am happy there."

He looked at me quizzically and then burst out laughing.

"You are a real caution," he said, "and as sloppy as a girl. Romance is what you live in. And I bet that when you were lying on your back last night, with your mouth open and snoring fit to raise all the major prophets from their graves, you were dreaming about Jerusalem the Golden, or the Lakes of Killarney. It sounded like it, anyhow."

Then we both laughed and all was well.

And so we came to Dahariyeh, our first Judean mountain village and, though I wisely said nothing, I did feel very romantic. I was back in the Palestine I knew and loved. The village rose in stony tiers up the hillside, one house seeming to stand on top of another, like grey bricks in a child's pyramid. And everywhere life was moving. Girls were off over the crest of the hill to draw water from a valley-well for the day's cooking. They walked divinely with—an anachronism in this Biblical setting—shiny petrol tins balanced on their shoulders. Sheep and goats were straggling out of the houses which they had been sharing for the night with their masters; and the men, with their mountains of clothes bellied out in the galloping wind, lounged by their doors or came down to the road to pass the time of day with us.

One man asked for a lift to Hebron, and when I said we were in a hurry, he held up four fingers, asking four minutes' grace to get ready for the road. Once aboard, he told us that his journey was for household shopping. It is a funny country where the men shop and the women till the fields. But our new friend was a sportsman as well as a housewife; and when

we flushed a great covey of sand grouse in a narrow valley, he begged for a gun, saying that he would shoot us a brace for our lunch. He was blankly disgusted when we told him that we didn't carry arms. "But you are Englishmen," he said. "I thought all Englishmen carried guns and shot everything they could see." Later, just as we were approaching Hebron, he pointed out a village on a hillside which, he said, was called Dilb. I knew another Palestinian Dilb, a New Jewish settlement, and I asked him if any Zionists lived in his part of the world. He positively jumped, hitting his head hard against our roof. "We have no Jews," he snarled. "Some did come to make their homes down here. They got their homes—in the cemetery."

After Hebron the road became ever more and more sophisticated. There were long stretches of excellent tarmac, and everywhere, even at Solomon's pools, there were hideous petrol advertisements; and Bethlehem, with its hoardings plastered with soap and sewing machine and travel posters, might have been suburbia. And then in a flash there was full compensation for all these modern horrors. Over the crest of a hill Jerusalem suddenly opened ahead of us, its sheer granite walls, the towers, the minarets, the spires, standing crisp against a now blue sky. I felt like the Psalmist of old. "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the House of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem."



OUR FIRST PALESTINIAN VILLAGE



JERUSALEM THE HARAM EL SHERIF

CHAPTER VII

JERUSALEM AND RELIGION

I WAS just through the Damascus Gate, when an old friend of mine, a distinguished Moslem, suddenly appeared out of a tiny barber's shop where he had been having his morning shave. I was delighted and he gave me a grand welcome. "It's good to see you," he said. "You always come the same time every year, and I always say that the sight of Tweedy means that the winter is over." And soon we were talking and discussing what had happened in Jerusalem since I had been there a year before, and he said: "Of course, you haven't seen Mohamed Ali el Hindi's tomb in the Haram. Are you busy this morning, or would you let me bring you down and show it to you? It is worth a visit." I was only too pleased, and off we went talking nineteen to the dozen, down through the Old City, past the Austrian hospice and the Via Dolorosa, and at last through the great arched gateway which leads on to the terrace of the Haram, or, as it is perhaps better known, the Temple enclosure.

The day had warmed into spring and the place looked lovely and was crowded everywhere. On the steps and on the pavement itself, on the grass and in the shade of the ilex and cypresses, *fellahin* (peasants) were sitting about enjoying a welcome sun, some talking in small groups, other squatting half drowsy on their hunkers in long silent rows. Every now and then one of them would rise to go to the water basins for ablution before prayer—the feet and the hands, the face and teeth. Then he would return to his place and, alone and absolutely indifferent to everyone else, and by them as completely ignored, stand and prostrate himself in prayer towards Mecca. This Moslem worship is terribly impressive in its individualism—no priest, no service, only worship.

We walked slowly, pausing often to savour the atmosphere just as a man will savour the aroma of a good cigar; and as we walked we talked of this and that—no politics,

only the lure of Islam and its immense power. My friend spoke bitterly of the iconoclasm of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey—the abolition of the Arabic script, the modernization of dress, and above all the relegation of religion to a back seat. "Every man," he said, "has religion in his soul. Not that every man is religious or need be religious in observance. Observance is only the outward sign of an inward instinct. But that instinct is in every man, and to try to stifle it by legislation is merely silly. The man—be he Christian or Jew or Moslem—who is without religion, without the knowledge in his soul that there is a God who is good and who will help, had better never been born." I agreed thoroughly and spoke of Russia. He shrugged his shoulders. "Terrible," he said. "Poor Russia. But of course politics must be kept out of religion and religion out of politics, if religion is to survive."

And so to Mohamed Ali el Hindi's tomb. He died in England, and at once an invitation was sent from the Council of the Haram that he should be buried within its precincts, and within a fortnight the body had arrived. In that fortnight Moslem enthusiasm worked the miracle of the tomb. They chose a small room in one of the *zawias* (pilgrims' hostels) which opened on to the cloisters of the Haram, and cleaned and repaired it, repaved it, widened its windows, opened a door leading on to the Haram itself, and put in two tiny and very lovely stone-traced windows and a marvellous iron door, bossed and bound. Then they carpeted the place, hung lamps, carved a beautiful inscription in stone to be the top lintel of one of the windows, and placed on either side of the door pillars of turquoise blue and gold. The result is beautiful, absolutely restful, and in a taste and of a colour scheme so perfect that I felt that the old artistry of Arab genius still lived. My friend explained this and that, and—may I say it—surprisingly did not boast. "We are proud to have him among us," he said, "and it was our duty to give a great man a permanent resting-place worthy of him here where he will always be remembered."

And then we fell to talking of Jerusalem, and once more of Islam. "Jerusalem," he said, "has always been and will always be a focus of religious enthusiasm. Read the Koran: 'No man may see paradise before he dies, but let him visit Jerusalem and he will have a glimpse of its delights.'" I capped his quotation glibly "You know," I said, "what the Jews in exile used to sing long before Christianity or Islam: 'I was glad when they said unto me, we will go into the

House of the Lord: our feet shall stand in thy gates, O Jerusalem.' " Perhaps I was wrong to introduce the topic of Jews; for at once our conversation took an unwanted political turn. He spoke rather sadly of the present state of Palestine, and of the tragedy of non-coöperation. "We Moslems," he said, "are not blind to Jewish feeling. We know that they love Jerusalem. Come and see."

It was Saturday, and he brought me to a tiny gate in the walls of the Haram. The Wailing Wall lay forty feet below us, and heaped up—that is the *mot juste*—against the great monoliths which Solomon's workmen hewed and masoned, was a vivid surging crowd. It was a most picturesque crowd. There were Askenazi Jews of the pre-war type, the men with wide-brimmed beaver-trimmed hats and side curls flowing down their cheeks; the women with gay handkerchiefs on their heads and heavy bunchy blouses and skirts. But among this Oriental throng I noticed that there were but few of the new type of post-war immigrant Jews. And as they sang and lamented over the destruction of their Temple their cries came up to me as Oriental cries. It was a solo and unison in a wailing minor key, and those nearest the walls fervently kissed the great stones and tears ran down their cheeks—real tears. And as I watched and listened, I realized, perhaps for the first time, that actually Jew and Arab are alike of the East and Oriental, despite whatever modern life may have imposed on their outward appearance. My friend too was watching the crowd below us. "You see," he said, "they too love Jerusalem, and their love is deep-rooted in their hearts and sincere, and Jerusalem is the home of their religion. But there are other Jews," he added, and his voice became suddenly metallic, "who seek to make Jerusalem the capital of a Jewish state. Never. . . ." And he turned sharply on his heel.

And so, keeping the best for the last, to the newly restored El Aksa Mosque which stands above the site of Solomon's stables. On the threshold canvas slippers were put over my European shoes, and, thus shod, I stepped out of the bright sunlight into mellow loveliness. It is a huge place. "But," commented my friend, "on the day of Mohamed Ali el Hindi's funeral, it was not nearly big enough for all who came to honour him. We were here in thousands, but so closely were we packed that prostration was out of the question and we could only bow in obeisance." But now it was almost empty save at the further end, which seemed miles and miles away.

There a single row of *fellahin* in their Arab dress were making their prayers. Up and down, up and down, the stance and the prostration; and when they bowed low the soles of their freshly washed feet looked like strikers on a piano, and borne on the whisper of an echo came the far-away sound of their muttered prayers. Unorganized, uncondacted worship is far more impressive than drilled fervour.

It was nearing noon, and the crowd was beginning to come in for the midday prayers. All looked at me and at my foreign clothes and hat, and I heard one bearded Arab mutter into his beard as he passed: "*Ya Yahudi*" ("O Jew"). I did feel an intruder.

And so out on to the terrace once more, and at the Great Gate my friend bade me farewell. I told him, as we parted, that Islam had a great heritage and that they might well be proud of what they had done for Mohamed Ali el Hindi. He eyed me quizzically. "You have seen the tomb," he said, "but do you realize what it means? By burying this great man here we have created the tradition that the Haram is the Westminster Abbey of Islam. The Jews may think that they are making Palestine a national home for the Jews; but they never thought of making Jerusalem their national mausoleum."

As I walked up the hill back through the Old City, I felt somehow a bitter taste in my mouth; and my friend's words came back to me almost ironically. "But of course politics must be kept out of religion and religion out of politics, if religion is to survive. . . ."

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It was Saturday, and our visit to the church of the Holy Sepulchre was beautifully timed. A series of processions were touring the holy sites, purifying them in preparation for the Sunday services. We stood just inside the doorway, and while we talked to the Moslem keeper of the place—for it is a Moslem who is in charge of these Christian precincts to keep order among the wrangling sects—we could hear a party of Franciscans chanting in Calvary high above us on the right. And then they came clattering down the steep narrow stone stairs, their candles in their hands, and made a circle round the stone over the Place of the Washing of the Body of Christ. They all knelt down and their chanting began again—another great Gregorian rhythm—each man reading his breviary by the light of his candle. And in the gloom of the place their

faces shone like lanterns. Then a priest rose and intoned a Latin prayer and the chief among them censed the stone, and the smoke of the incense came to us in great intoxicating waves. Then a long "Amen" and the procession reformed and made its way through the forest of pillars and out into the brightness of the Rotunda. There another service and a censuring of the Tomb itself, and more chanting which rose and fell as the echoes carried it up and up and round and round the tiers of galleries above us.

We left them there and made our way past the Greek Catholicon, past the Place of the Scourging and along the ambulatory behind the High Altar. The voices of the Franciscans were lost, but new voices took their place and they came from below ground. We wandered on until we came to the entrance to the steep stone staircase which leads down to St. Helena's Chapel where the True Cross was found; and, as we looked down we saw coming to meet us out of the gloom the purification party of the Armenian Church. On their heads were their high black candle-extinguisher hoods; each had a candle in his hand; and all sang as they climbed. And as I watched them coming ever nearer they looked—and this is not flippancy—just like gnomes coming out of a fairy mine.

And so back to the Catholicon, where a Greek service was just beginning. We took our places in the stalls which flank both sides of the Cathedral. The Franciscans had been dressed in the coarse habits of their Order; the Armenians had been sombre in black: here the vestments were magnificent—purple, white, and gold—and the liturgy and the chants were drilled and controlled to the second and in that cathedral gloom wonderfully impressive. And my mind went back to my reflections in the Haram. There was no intimacy and little spontaneity in this Greek service, and yet in no sense did it jar. I could not make up my mind which of the two types of worship affected me more.

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After lunch we took out the car and drove to Bethlehem. It was a lovely day, bright, sunny, and warm, and when our road took its last turn and there opened in front of us the hillside amphitheatre up which the town straggles, I knew that this was the perfect Sunday afternoon expedition.

There are guides and guides, but we were lucky. The man we took was a Christian Arab of long residence in Bethlehem,

and, though I always start by hating every guide, this man had a certain flair for the dramatic, and in the end I found myself listening with all my ears. The Empress Helena's dream, which not only had guided her to the inn where she had discovered in almost perfect repair the stable, but had indicated the precise position where she would and did find the wooden manger. The miraculous salvation of the Church from Moslem destruction, due to the lucky chance that the infidel conquerors had mistaken the figures of the Three Magi depicted in semi-Arab, semi-Persian dress on a wall fresco for heroes of Islam. The subsequent chequered fortunes of the building, first as a stable for crusaders' war-horses, later as night quarters for camels waiting to be sold in the weekly market outside. And as the man talked he pointed out this and that—here the remains of an early painting, there on one of the brown marble columns which support the nave, the four slots in the form of a cross into which every Orthodox worshipper inserts his four fingers, just as in the Roman Catholic Church worshippers dip their hands in holy water and cross themselves before they enter the chapel.

And his comments were very shrewd. The church, he told us, was probably the oldest in the world, and had certainly had more vicissitudes than any other church in Christendom. "Indeed, in olden days, worship must have been quite a secondary function; but," he went on piously, "let us hope that in those days of common tribulation there anyhow existed a degree of Christian harmony among the sects who worshipped here, which certainly does not exist to-day. The scandals there have been within these walls! A Latin floor-sweeper overreaches into Greek territory; a Greek carpet overlaps a tiny section of Armenian pavement; a Latin procession crosses an Armenian carpet. And the result, endless rowing, as often as not ending in open fisticuffs, even in the shadow of the High Altar. And most of it is as ridiculous as it is irreverent."

We had climbed the steps leading from the lower level of the nave to the floor of the chancel, and stood looking out towards St. Jerome's Cell and the Roman Catholic cathedral. He pointed to a well-worn strip of pavement just below the chancel level. "Do you see that strip of floor?" he said. "That was the beat of the Turkish sentry: for here, as in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the infidel Turk had to be employed to keep some sort of order among the Christians. Now it is you British who are responsible for that bit of

pavement. You are Christians and you are impartial ; but come any morning and watch your British policeman sweeping the place with his broom. Standing over him to see that he does not clean beyond his strict limits, and that no jot of defiling dust fall from his pan to pollute the neighbouring pavement, will be a Latin, a Greek, and an Armenian priest."

On our way down to the Grotto we found a harassed British official accompanied by a Greek and a Latin priest. It was a court of enquiry. On the wall of the stairway hang two tapestried curtains, one belonging to the Latins, one to the Greeks. Recently a passing visitor had inadvertently disturbed them, with the result that the nails by which they were fastened to the wall fell out. Who was to put them in again ? The Latins had refused permission to the Greeks, and vice versa, and the problem had become more acute than ever, when a British official, to end the dispute, hammered them in place himself. This was more than either the Greeks or the Latins could bear. Each said that the nails had been put in wrongly and that the tapestries now hung out of line, with the result that the *status quo* was hopelessly compromised. Hence the court of enquiry.

In the Grotto itself everything is eloquent of Christian discord. The place is copiously hung with tiny coloured lamps—so many belonging to the Armenians, so many to the Greeks, and so many to the Latins ; and wigs are on the green if one sect so much as touches a lamp belonging to another. Again, the domed recess over the Place of the Birth is still charred and smoke-stained from damage done on Christmas Eve, 1870, when the Latins and Greeks came to blows on some petty issue and between them set the place on fire. Below the dome on the floor itself is a brass and silver star nailed to the ground. It was the spark which kindled the Crimean War.

The Greeks own the site and placed the star there as a memorial, whereupon the Latins, again quoting that miserable *status quo*, protested hotly ; and when the Greeks refused to yield, the Latins surreptitiously removed the offending plaque on their own. There was at once a great flare up, and eventually Napoleon III took the part of the Latins while the Czar Nicholas I supported the Greeks. And now I can quote our guide. "I heard the story from my father," he said. "The Turks—the infidels—in an eleventh-hour attempt to patch up this Christian quarrel, invited both the French and the Russian Ministers in Jerusalem to state their case before

him, here where we are standing. They came ; neither would budge an inch ; arguments led to high words ; and eventually the Russian departed up one stairway to the Greek convent, and the Frenchman stumped up the other to the Latin cathedral. And you know what the Crimea cost you British. It almost sounds silly," he added, "but curious things do happen in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I think it is the altitude. We who live here, can stand the heights and keep calm ; but you foreigners, as soon as you come here, get violently excited, and the oddest things occur."

We were talking in whispers, for, kneeling in deepest devotion before the Place of the Birth, were two women of Bethlehem wearing the high starched linen headdress and coifs which have been worn in Bethlehem since Crusader days. They bowed low over the star and kissed it and then, rising, backed slowly out of the Presence. They too, like the Jews at the Wailing Wall and the Moslems in the Haram, concentrated all their love on the holy sites.

CHAPTER VIII

PALESTINE AND POLITICS

MY host was a Jew, and dinner had been surprisingly free from politics, and great fun ; but after dinner, when we were left alone, out came the inevitable question : "And what do you think of the situation to-day?" I replied that the Arabs and the Jews seemed to be far more on one another's nerves than they were a year ago, and that I was thankful that I didn't live in Palestine to-day. My friend's reaction was terrific. "Well, now perhaps you do understand what it is like for us Jews. Year in year out we seem to be living in a state of siege, and it is far worse now than it was three years ago. You remember the nineteen twenty-nine riots. Well, for the first time they showed us our terrible weakness in numbers, and we were then, as we are now, in fear of our lives. That's a jolly reflection, after fifteen years of *your* national home. And what is the reason of it ? First you have blown cold, then you have blown hot, and in the end no one has the faintest notion of what you are after ; and as a matter of fact, to-day the Arabs distrust you quite as much as we Jews. And they are as cunning as foxes. You know how the Turks went on at Lausanne, playing a waiting game until you gave in. Well, that's what the Arabs are doing to-day. But take it from me, we Jews have got something up our sleeves. You've given us a promise, and we are going to see that we are not let down ; and we are as safe as houses. Who rules the world to-day ? America. Who made you give Ireland freedom ? America. And who is going to make you give us Jews our rights ? America."

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Both of us knew that I had come to talk politics, and I told him that I hoped he would give me his opinion as a moderate Jew. His reply rather disturbed me. "If you want to do anything in Palestine," he said, "you can't be moderate, and whether you are an Englishman or a Jew or an Arab,

you can't be impartial. I am sorry to have to say this, but it is true. Indeed, I think that we will never get a yard towards a solution under a British Mandate. You have axes to grind in Palestine: you can't deny it; and I see no hope for the future until the League of Nations changes the Mandate. I would like a Swedish High Commissioner. Swedes have no axes to grind in Palestine."

But all this was leading nowhere, so I tried to change the subject. "But anyhow, we have tried to administer the Balfour Declaration impartially." Then, when he shrugged his shoulders, I asked him point blank for a Jewish definition of the Declaration. There was hardly a pause. He seemed to have it pat. "We Jews," he said, "aren't out to have a numerical majority in the country, nor yet to own the majority of the land. All we ask for is our rights as the intellectual majority in the country. We aren't Arabs: we are civilized; and if Palestine ever does get a Government of its own we demand the key positions—Finance, Justice, and Public Security." "But," I said, "if you got that, Palestine would be a Jewish state. Balfour never promised that." There was another shrug of the shoulders. "No, but that is what he meant. Do you think he intended that we should be handed over body and soul to the tender mercy of those Arabs? Do you know what happens to our Jews in the Yemen? They have to wear special uniforms; they may not build houses more than so many stories high; they may not ride horses; and if a Jewish child loses its parents, it is forcibly converted into Islam. Did Balfour mean that to happen to us here?" Once more I felt hopeless. "But you have the guarantee of the League of Nations and our Mandate." He gave me a pitying look. "We don't trust your Mandate any more. You have let us down too often. The truth is you British are all mad about the desert and the Arabs, and you recoil from us Jews and the Ghetto."

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Driving back to Jerusalem, I shared the back seat of a taxi with a pre-war Jewish settler. He was a German from Sarona, and we talked in German. Politics of course. He wasn't complimentary, but his was at any rate a standpoint which I could appreciate. "If only," he said, "you British and the Zionists would leave us, who live here, to run our own show for a bit! You are all foreigners; and what do you know or care about Palestine? You British have your British

point of view, and the Zionists are French, American, German, Polish, Italian, anything. . . . And the lot of you are only here because of the huge salaries you get. But we live here ; Palestine is our home ; and if we were given a free hand I bet that within two years we would have made good neighbourly arrangements with the Arabs, who would be as thankful as we would be to have done with all this international messing. And I am not speaking for the local Jewish farmer only, I am speaking just as much for my Arab friends. And they are my friends."

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When I accepted the invitation my Arab host had sworn that it would be just an ordinary tea party. "I want you to see some of us," he said, "as well as your Jews. You are always with the Jews." I had accepted on those terms. But when I arrived I found to my horror that I was very much the guest of the afternoon. And I was still more embarrassed when I discovered that at least half of my fellow guests only talked the highest type of classical Arabic, of which, of course, I couldn't understand one word. I did try to talk to them in my kitchen Arabic, but, for all either of us understood, I might have been Edgar Wallace talking to Dan Chaucer.

Happily, however, the remaining half could talk English and French, and away we went hammer and tongs along the well-worn political highway. They, of course, did most of the talking. Would I, if I was an Arab, be accommodating towards the Mandate ? Of course I wouldn't. I knew as well as they knew that England was ruled by the Jews. "Palestine is under the British Mandate and England is under the Jewish Mandate." A spritely sally in English which provoked so much laughter that it had to be translated into classical Arabic for the rest of the party. And then the question of self-government for Palestine. Why should the Arabs co-operate ? A legislative council, they said, would be very nice if it was impartial and representative. But would it be ? Of course not. The Arab majority would always be squashed by the British casting vote, and it would always go to the Jews. "The truth of the matter is, you British are scared of the Jews and you aren't frightened of us, and of course the weakest goes to the wall." I demurred hotly, which only served to stimulate the attack. "It is no good your shaking your head," said one. "You can't answer this question. Two years ago we asked you to found an agricultural bank to lend cheap money to the Arab farmers, and to save them from the Jewish and Syrian moneylenders."

You agreed, and then you did nothing. Why? Because the Jews vetoed it, as they wanted to go on lending to the Arab farmer so that when he became bankrupt the Zionists could foreclose on his land and get it for a song for their immigrants." "And here is another question," said another. "Your High Commissioner allowed the Jewish colonies to arm themselves against us, but *we* are not allowed to arm ourselves against the Jews. Why? Because the British Government has to obey the Jews of the City of London. Oh, it's no good talking. We know as well as you do that you can't help yourselves, and so we are helping ourselves without you. And that is why we are not co-operating. Time is on our side; for Zionism is charity-fed, and in time even the most charitable of Jews will begin to think twice before they send more money to bolster up something that is not paying dividends. For Jews like dividends. But if we started being accommodating with the Jews, then there would be dividends, and money would pour in and we would be lost. No. Better not to have any truck with them at all."

And so on and so on—two gay but very tiring hours which left me in the end completely worn out and more bewildered than ever.

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I had overdone it all day and was tired and jumpy—perhaps the altitude; anyhow, I couldn't go to bed, and, after trying to read for an hour, I finally gave in to the spirit of unrest and decided I would go off and see what Jerusalem night-life was like. Ten minutes later in the Jaffa road I opened the door of a so-called night-club where I had been told that the youth and beauty of New Jerusalem were wont to repair of an evening. The place was crowded and full of smoke, and I felt rather shy in an atmosphere which was entirely Continental and not even faintly Oriental. But it was an hospitable place, and, seeing me stranded, a Polish waiter took me in hand and got me a seat in a sort of low-backed cubicle, rather like a roofless railway carriage. I ordered *Löwenbrau* beer in German, and proceeded to take stock. Sharing my cubicle were five Jews, four men and a woman—all of different nationalities and all speaking a mixture of English and Hebrew. They were most friendly and most inquisitive, and, when I told them that I came from London, proceeded inevitably to the eternal question: "And what do you think of Jerusalem?" Happily there was no need at all for me to answer, for at once

they all started telling me what they thought of it. "Thirteen years ago," said one, "you wouldn't have found a place like this here. We've put a lot of pep into this old burg since we came." Another: "And there are lots of other night-clubs like this, and we get cinemas and plays; and now we've fixed up things so well that all the latest talkies from New York are here in a month." Then a third: "And we've got our daily papers and libraries and museums. . . . Why, old Jerusalem doesn't know itself these days." And so on and so on, while I drank my beer quietly without having to take the trouble to talk at all myself.

The woman of the party sat opposite me, rather a jolly-looking matron, the wife of one of the four men; and suddenly without any warning a pale young man with long black hair flung himself down rather theatrically beside her. The four men laughed. "Poor old Isaac," they said to me, "he is always like that." The woman turned to them rather crossly. "Why can't you leave him alone?" she said. "Can't you see he is tired?" She then turned to the man, and I am afraid I eavesdropped badly. They were talking in English.

The Woman: "Isaac, you look tired. Too much chess?"

The Man: "Yes, two hours of it. And I am so tired that I am afraid to shut my eyes lest they would not reopen. Life is pain."

The Woman: "What nonsense! Have a coffee?"

The Man: "Why should I have a coffee? I didn't ask for coffee. Coffee is for those who enjoy life. I don't. Life is pain."

The Woman: "Oh, Isaac, do shut up. Why can't you have some fun yourself like the rest of us?"

The Man: "Fun! You fool. This isn't fun. You're only making yourself believe that it's fun. There is no fun in life. Life is pain."

There was lots more of it—all tenth-rate Chekov, and very dispiriting stuff to hear at one o'clock in the morning; and whether it was the beer or the Chekov I don't know, but I suddenly felt extremely sleepy, and twenty minutes later was safe in bed and, I suppose, snoring.

I have a friend in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a very old Franciscan monk who has lived forty years in Jerusalem. I went to bid him good-bye. "Well," he said, "till next year, if I am alive. I hope I shall be, for I love Palestine—even to-day when it is so sad a place. I have no politics, but this much I know: a house which is divided against itself will never be a home for anyone."

CHAPTER IX

JERUSALEM AND LIFE

THE telephone message from the Arab Training College asked me to be there at ten and said that I could hear a lesson of either geography or arithmetic. Which would I like? I voted for arithmetic, and was told that they were going to do simple fractions. So off I went, trying to remember something about denominators and numerators.

When the head master showed me into the class-room, all the boys rose—funny little fellows in scarlet jerseys and khaki shorts and wearing no stockings, but jolly little sandals, and their eyes were like black boot-buttons. There were thirty pairs of boot-buttons and all at once focused on me, until I felt quite as nervous as a new boy. Then they all sat down again and the lesson began. A young pupil-teacher was on trial, and he started with five minutes of oral and blackboard demonstration which I followed with great interest and a certain amount of bewilderment. For when I had accepted to hear an arithmetic lesson, I had quite forgotten that, being Arabic arithmetic, it would be, for me, arithmetic through the looking-glass—from right to left instead of from left to right. But the little boys were quite at home. The teacher wrote a sum on the blackboard and invited anyone who could do it to hold up his hand. Up went a forest of hands, waving like reeds shaken by the wind, and as they waved the children hissed—there is no other word—“*Ya Ustaz! Ya Ustaz!*” (“O Excellency!”), tacking as many *z*’s on to the end of *Ustaz* as their lungs would hold. And then, amid great excitement, the teacher selected one of the hissers, gave him the chalk and told him to finish the sum on the blackboard. Most of them survived the ordeal, but one tiny urchin—he couldn’t have been more than six—made a frightful mess of his sum—one-quarter plus one-third. After scratching his head with the chalk, which earned him a brisk reprimand, he gave the answer as “One”. Whereupon all the other horrid little boys

shrieked with laughter. This went on for about half an hour ; then a bell went and all rose together and filed out of the classroom, two by two, as demure and smug-faced as choristers in a cathedral.

They were all waiting for me in the playground when I left, and I again had to run the gauntlet of those piercing boot-button eyes. I later learned that one of them—I expect it was the naughty little boy who couldn't do the sum—had started the rumour that I was the Prince of Wales.

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I read my Bible hard while I ate my lunch, for I had an appointment to meet "X" at the Zion Gate at two o'clock, and he was to take me down to see Hezekiah's Conduit, which flows from the Virgins' Well to the Pool of Siloam. "And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and all his might and how he made a pool and a conduit and brought water into the City, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah?" That was the context. Now for the facts. Sennacherib the Assyrian was invading Palestine and Hezekiah had withdrawn into Jerusalem and was preparing for a siege. But Hezekiah was no mean strategist. Large invading armies must have assured water supplies. "So he stopped all the fountains and the brook which ran through the land, saying, Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?" By the time my lunch was over I had almost translated myself back to the exciting days of 700 B.C.

"X" met me at the Zion Gate and together we stumbled and slipped down the steep slopes of Ophel. I felt vaguely uncomfortable when I saw his dress. He was in shorts and sand-shoes : I in a smart suiting and town boots. But not for long. For when we reached the Virgins' Well he at once advised me to get behind a wall and to prepare myself for wading. Luckily I was wearing a long mackintosh, and behind its shelter off went my trousers and my socks, and I pulled my woollen pants as high up my fat thighs as they would go, and then, feeling rather like a mid-winter bather about to enter the Serpentine, I put my lovely boots on again and picked my way gingerly over the rough path to the entrance to the Well. There, to my annoyance, I had to stand for five minutes feeling a perfect fool, in front of a troupe of giggling tourists, while two small Arab girls finished drawing the household water at the bottom of the stone stairway which leads to the Well.

When the way was clear, both of us lighted our candles

and down we went. "*Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.*" My first step was across a narrow, slippery plank spanning three yards of pool. "Take care," said "X" over his shoulder; "it is six feet deep." I took very great care and survived. Then we swung sharp left into a narrow tunnel and were in the conduit itself. It was pitch dark and barely as wide as the span of my shoulders, and only in places could I stand upright; and all the time my beautiful boots were squelching in two feet of oozing mud, while swishing water slapped the back of my calves. And then, of course, my candle went out. But that didn't make much matter, as "X" had been careful with his, so that I had his light ahead, and on we went in step with the water hissing past us, like sea lapping the entrance of a cave.

It was very exciting, and, sentimentalist that I am, I soon let myself drift into pure rornance. I was back in the days of Hezekiah; and clear cut on the walls and slanting *away* from me were the pick-marks of his hewers of stone; and for the nonce I became one with them in spirit as, cramped and perspiring, they toiled desperately against time to get the conduit through before Sennacherib arrived. They and I were one party working from the Virgins' Well; another party from the Pool of Siloam was working simultaneously towards us; and as I trudged along I really felt the excitement of those old Jewish engineers who, with no compasses to direct them, were little better than burrowing moles working towards each other through the solid rock and hoping against hope that the two tunnels would meet in the middle. And if Hezekiah was anything like some of the generals I knew in the war, I am sure he fussed all the time. "Hasten, hasten; the Assyrians are in Galilee, in Samaria, at Shiloh."

And then suddenly I found myself twisting and turning with the tunnel. The two parties could hear each other's picks and were hunting for each other. We passed a cul-de-sac where they had cast and drawn a blank. Poor devils. And then all at once "X" and his candle disappeared round a sharp right-angled turn, leaving me in a spissy darkness. I tore on and turned the corner to find him waiting for me and standing upright. For the roof had suddenly become higher. And then I looked at the walls. All the pick marks were now leaning obliquely *towards* me. We had met the Siloam party. I nearly shook "X" by the hand to congratulate him, and I hope that Hezekiah gave his Jewish engineer the equivalent of an O.B.E.

We stood talking for a time, looking at a hole above our heads where there used to be a Jewish inscription telling the story of Hezekiah's labours and triumph. The tablet is gone ; the Turks removed it, and I believe it moulders in some Constantinople museum or more probably on a rubbish heap in Stambul. But, tablet or no tablet, I had shared Hezekiah's triumph : the conduit was pierced, and the Assyrian army was waterless. "And when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses."

We stumbled on, and gradually the levels became easier and the mud deeper ; next I noticed that "X's" candle seemed less bright ; and then suddenly a pinprick of white light appeared far ahead, and two minutes later we were out in bright sunlight by Siloam's Pool. Our reception there was reminiscent of Billingsgate. Two Arab matrons were washing their household linen, and we had churned up the water into muddy coffee, and they were furious and very rude. But I do know a little bit about the East now. It is less the soft word than the ready quip that turneth away wrath. So I pulled my mackintosh up, almost indecently high. "What are you making such a fuss about ?" I said. "Your washing is not the only thing that has got muddy. Look at my calves." The ladies were so convulsed with laughter that they almost fell into the Pool.

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It was dark as I made my way towards the Damascus gate, but in David Street and on through the bazaars it was almost as light as day, and the narrow-arched lanes were actually difficult to negotiate. A feast opened next evening ; everyone was shopping ; and everywhere there were groups of goats and sheep crowded round a shepherd squatting in their midst. Standing over them was their owner, and prospective clients wandered keen-eyed among the groups. Suddenly one would spot promising meat, and a kid or a lamb would be hauled out of the herd and pinched and felt all over like a Surrey capon. Then came the haggling and counter-haggling—first a waving of arms, then a great deal of talk, and finally a bargain. And then a boy would be called to take the purchase away, and as likely as not he would carry it off in his arms like a baby, or sling it round his neck like a woman's fur. On I went, and I might have been in Mitcham Fair on a Saturday night. There were lamps and flares everywhere. The booths were gay and animated, and, as every purchase

was a haggie, Moslem Jerusalem was enjoying itself to the full. Women bought beads, men bought shoes, girls bought ribbons, and boys whistles ; and as I loitered by a sweet-shop I caught the infection and bought a round box of candied Damascus fruits.

Just as I had completed the transaction—not that I haggled—I had the fun of seeing the East meeting the West. Four tiny Arab children were playing soldiers. One was in command, and his orders were in English : “Left, right, left, right ; one, two, three, four” ; and then “one, two, three, four” again. His soldiers marched like Grenadiers, and took his orders like automats, and I asked the Colonel how he knew his English. He gave me a Guards’ salute. “My father takes care of the High Commissioner,” he said proudly, and I felt that a High Commissioner in the care of the father of such a son was in safe hands.

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After tea we went out for a walk in the Old City, and from the Damascus Gate made our way towards the New Gate through chilly winding alleyways with the last of the sun catching the tops of the houses. When we got to New Gate the three of us were unaccountably filled with the spirit of adventure. The great walls and battlements stood out stark against the evening sky, and by the gate there was a stone stairway leading up to the rampart walk, which, before it was condemned as unsafe, used to be open to the public. Barbed wire now barred our way. But while we stood gaping and wondering whether at our age we were bold enough to try, a fat Turkish barber in a shop close by came up to us mischievously. “It is quite easy,” he said. “I’ll give you all a leg over the barbed wire.” National pride was at stake. It was a challenge, and as representatives of the Mandatory Power we could not hold back. So over we went, heaved and applauded by the Turk, who meantime had posted his lather-boy round the corner to warn us in case a policeman came along. Two minutes later we were scuttling along the top of the walls to get out of sight of the traffic of the street. It was the greatest fun, and all of us felt rather like naughty schoolboys.

From the top we had a view right into back gardens which are normally hidden behind tall blind walls ; and there was always that pinch of excitement that we had penetrated behind the Moslem veil and might at any minute see

an odalisque or two enjoying the cool of the evening. And it was also beautiful. Away in the distance, seen past the spires and domes of the Old City, were the Judean Hills, and beyond them the mountains of Moab, all caught in the rays of the setting sun and full of superb lights and shadows. We meandered along perfectly happily until we got to the Jaffa Gate, where danger lurked. We were out of bounds; and not only could we be spotted by the people coming up David Street, but there was also a police post by the Gate, and if we attempted to descend by the ordinary way we would be caught at once. Nor did we wish to go back to the New Gate, where we felt sure a policeman would be waiting to receive us.

However, on our way we had spotted a garden on a level only six feet below our rampart walk, a descent which we thought we could manage with care. So back we went and jumped—only to realize almost at once that we were out of the frying-pan into the fire. The garden belonged to the Latin Patriarchate, which is not normally very friendly towards British rule, and once inside we were trespassers, and trapped at that. For nowhere could we find any door leading back to normal life and safety. Nor was there anybody about to help us to get out of a scrape. However, eventually Roy spotted a wicket gate in a hedge which led down some iron stairs into a lower courtyard. Windows opened on to the courtyard, and through them we saw some nuns cooking in a kitchen. The nuns made our adventure almost an escapade, especially when they showed neither apprehension nor resentment—through the window—at seeing us where we were, which was obviously where we had no right to be.

So the three of us smiled as hard as we could, and then bolted round to the door and knocked. It was opened by a very attractive and demure Miss dressed like a charity orphan, who, however, seemed equally at sea with whatever language we talked. And we tried three. But she did not shut the door, and that was invitation enough for us; and once inside the nunnery and out of sight of possibly prying eyes we felt far happier. The Miss disappeared and fetched a Superior, equally attractive and demure, and, better still, a fluent French speaker. She very kindly swallowed our story that we had got lost, and I think that if the Miss had not returned to watch events, she would have winked. At any rate, when we told her that our one wish was to get out into the street again, she smiled and showed us the way to a door leading down a long corridor. "You can pass this door," she said;

"but shut it behind you. It leads to the monks' quarters, and we nuns are not allowed to cross the threshold." We shook her warmly by the hand, and, hoping that no monk had seen the door open and close, we almost tiptoed through the long corridor. And, speaking for myself, I may say that I was heartily glad to be back in a public street again as a law-abiding citizen.

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My last day in Jerusalem I took tea in the Armenian Quarter, and later, with my hostess, I went out on to a high verandah over-looking the Old City. "How I curse that Kaiser!" she said. "Here we are right in the middle of the Templars' Quarter, and that vulgarian had need start town-planning. Look at those red-tiled roofs and that ghastly church tower. It is a scandal. The whole should have been left grey and granite."

I agreed with her: for otherwise everything was perfect. The sun was setting, and the Old City and, beyond it, the Mount of Olives were bathed in pink. Slowly as we watched, the evening shadows climbed ever higher. First the domes and minarets in the foreground; then the Walls and Gethsemane with its gilded cupolas: one after another they faded from pink to purple, from purple to blue, and at last there remained only the crest of Scopus and the peak of the Mount of Olives. And then they too were gone—swallowed up in the tide of the dying day—and only the sky remained, a vast sweep of rose which in another half-hour would be sombred into the tense indigo of an Eastern night.

We hardly spoke; and then from the minarets began the call of Islam to evening prayer. Near by, just above the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a *muezzin* had stepped out on to his tiny platform and stood silhouetted black against the last of the day and facing into the west to see the last of the sun disappear behind the hills. And suddenly he raised his hand to his ear and began to call—half-tones, quarter-tones, a melody which was hardly a melody; but it rose and fell in a close minor cadence with a ripple of sound which came to us as it might have been the tuning up of the wood instruments in some grand orchestra. And his voice was but one of many. For Jerusalem has many minarets, and from each came the call to the faithful in Islam "Allahu Akhbar" ("God the Almighty"). And then, almost abruptly, the call ended and silence reigned once more. I heard myself catch my breath in the sudden way one does when a strain or ecstasy passes.

CHAPTER X

JUDEA—SAMARIA—GALILEE

IN Jerusalem we stayed in an excellent hostel ; but hostels, however excellent, have got an atmosphere entirely of their own—indeed, sometimes I felt that I was staying at Todgers' with Mr. and Miss Pecksniff. Our last night we retired after dinner to the sitting-room to join the ladies. There were six of them—all pilgrims—and they were extremely kind to us in a rather pleasant soft Victorian way. When we told them that we travelled without arms, I almost felt attacks of "the vapours" in the offing ; except for one old lady who, with her carpeted feet on the fender, called a spade a spade. She made jolly conversation. "Deserts !" she said. "Not for me ! Last year—or, let me see, was it the year before ? —I met a Frenchman or, rather, I met someone who had met a Frenchman . . . Dear me ! My memory is not what it was. And he told me, or he told my friend, that he knew someone who had some friends who had been crossing by car from Damascus to Baghdad, and they were all eaten by wolves." The other ladies all felt faint and a sort of cooing arose. "Oh, I do wish you would take revolvers with you." Then the old lady again : "And another party I heard of, got lost, and when they were found they were all mad. He ! He ! Tee ! Tee ! Tee !" I could have slapped her crabbed old cheeks.

But Todgers' had produced a charming Cambridge don, and when we left for the north next morning we were a party of three. He was bound for Aleppo on his way to Cyprus, and we fixed up a grand third seat in the rumble of the lorry among the baggage—plenty of pillows and cushions, both of which are worth their weight in gold on lorry travels over rough roads ; and he had the luncheon basket to sit on and a roll of rabbit-wire as a back rest. Indeed, in many ways the rumble-seat was the best of all.

All Todgers' saw us off, including the old lady, who was quite sentimental and never mentioned wolves or lonely

deaths in mid-desert; and in great form we climbed Mount Scopus, and then, after one last look back at the beautiful War Cemetery and the Old City which we were not to see again for four months, we were over the top with the Judean Hills stretching ahead—one stony horizon after another. I love these hills. I love the colour—the grey of the stone, and the olive-green of the stunted trees; and as we chugged along the excellent surface of the Nablus road, up and down hill, round corners and back again, all the spring sowings in the valleys were vivid green and up the slopes among the rock were subtle patches, faintly seen, of pink cyclamen with every now and then a flaming splash of red poppies.

We were soon a party of four; for past Ramallah, as we were dropping into the *Wadi El Harami* (the valley of the Thieves), we spied ahead of us a tall, heavily robed Arab, walking with a fine spring and swinging from his hand, much as a girl swings her vanity bag, a brand new petrol tin. It was his only luggage. He had come from Amman in Transjordan, where he had been celebrating Bairam, and was bound for a village just short of Nablus and on our road. He clambered aboard, almost smothering Cambridge in the rumble, and for a while he and I talked polite generalities. But a cigarette thawed his reserve and soon he was pouring out the story of his life. Arabs adore pouring out the stories of their lives on the slightest provocation.

In the village whither he was bound, he hoped to find a new wife. His first spouse had died young, leaving him a son and heir, and he was lonely. "But," he added, "I must get a good wife: cheap ones breed cheap children, and the mother I want for my children will cost twenty pounds at least." He shrugged his shoulders. "And money is scarce these times." "But," I said, "even at that price, how can you be sure you will like her?" "*Maaleesh*" ("never mind"), he replied; "Women are women and are made to bear us children, and it is good blood that I want in my family." Had it not been for his rapsallion appearance, it might have been a squire of Victorian times speaking.

But soon he dropped the discussion of his domestic affairs, for we were passing through country which he had fought over as a Turkish soldier. "You English were on that hill and we Arabs were with the Turks and the Germans over against you. The Turks are all right when they have enough bread and olives to eat; but when they are hungry, as they were here, they are brutes. Jemal Pasha used to tell us Arabs

that we were all spies in the pay of the English, and if we so much as winked an eye, we were hung. And the Germans always used us for the dirty work and called us cattle ; and there was no food, and you were always shooting at us—boom ! boom ! boom !—and when I saw that if I stayed with the Turks I would either die of hunger or be hung or be killed by you, I made up my mind to join the British Army. So one morning just before dawn I got out of my trench and crawled down the valley and up the hill, and I got to within ten yards of your trenches before one of the Johnnies saw me. Thank goodness he didn't shoot straight ; and before he had time to load again I was in the trench with my hands up, shouting, 'Johnny, Johnny !' After that it was lovely. We went in a fine train to Cairo and had a lovely camp and as much rice and bully as we could eat [“bully” has now passed into the Arabic vernacular] ; and two blankets each, and, of course, no work. But one day I and my friends were not at all pleased when an English officer told us that, as we were Arabs, we were going to be sent home to the Hejaz to fight for the Sherif against the Turks. We didn't want to leave our lovely camp or to fight anybody. But in the end it was all right. At Jeddah you were feeding everyone, and we got more rice and bully and blankets and uniforms, and a rifle each and bullets, and above all pay—the Turks had paid us nothing. And, of course, there was no work except every now and then we used to go out and blow up the railway. But we knew that if the Turks captured us we would be hung, so we took care not to fight too close. And then I went with El Urens (Lawrence) to Deraa, and there we killed and killed. But only Turks. We left the Germans alone, as they were too dangerous. And then Damascus”—he clicked his tongue loudly against his teeth—“and Sherif Feisal and more new uniforms and good food and pay, and, of course, no work. I could have stayed there for ever. And then the French—may Allah forgive them—turned us all out, and back I went to the Hejaz. But this time it was rotten. There was no food and no pay, and there was a real war ; and eventually we were all shut up in Jeddah with Ibn Saud outside waiting to cut our throats. We were all very happy when our side gave in and the war was over. Then I went to Amman in Transjordan, and at first it was fine. Sherif Abdulla had a grand army, and the British paid. But after a while the British said that Abdulla must pay himself. So he said : “*Maaleesh*. I have no money, so I won't have an Army.” Then I went to

Iraq. But there there was too much work ; so I came back, and I am not going to be a soldier any more. Since then I have worked a bit, sometimes for the Jews—may Allah curse them ; sometimes for the Government, who are very stingy ; but God know how I am going to get that twenty pounds. I wish I had gone to America, like my brothers. One is in Venezuela and the other in Cuba, and they used to send us letters full of money, and they have shops and wives and lots of children and are very happy. But the Americans don't like us Arabs any more. Yesterday I tried to go there ; but when I went for a passport to the Consul in Jerusalem he asked me so many questions that I thought he was going to arrest me, so I ran away."

This was all the greatest fun, and I translated the best bits to Roy and Cambridge, and time passed like wild-fire, and we seemed to arrive at our soldier of fortune's village in a flash. He asked us to come up with him and see his son, but we pleaded time. "But," I added, "next time I am passing I will go up to the village and knock at the greatest door and ask for Mahmud the soldier, and then you can give us coffee and show us perhaps two sons : for *Allah Karim* [God is good], and twenty pounds is not a great deal of money for a clever man like you." His eyes beamed and he shook me warmly by the hand, "*Insha'allah* [Please God]," he said, "You are a harbinger of good fortune."

After him the rest of our way was almost dull. We picked up no further passengers to entertain us ; the road, though twisting, was monotonously good ; and we droned steadily into the north past Shechem, where Jacob is buried ; past Samaria, where Jezebel was eaten by dogs and Salome danced before Herod ; past Jenin, which was Ahab's summer residence ; out across the plain of Jezreel ; and then a stiff climb on a marvellously engineered road up to Nazareth, where we turned sharp west and back again into the plain along the River Kishon. We reached Haiffa just as the sun was setting, with Mount Carmel standing up grim and purple against the flush of a dying day.

We spent two nights in a very expensive and unsatisfactory hotel, and Roy Walwyn and Cambridge visited Acre and explored Mount Carmel, while I called on old friends and visited the New Haiffa Harbour works which are to make the town the best port on the Levant between Smyrna and Alexandria. But rain and wild weather and the hotel bill spoilt our stay, and we were all delighted, even

though it was still raining, to be away on our next stage to Tiberias.

Half-way to Nazareth we stopped to visit Nahalal, one of the new Jewish colonies. It is not a communist settlement where everything belongs to everybody and nothing to anybody, but is organized on a system of small independent holdings with a central co-operative buying and selling organization. Our arrival was almost dangerous. The rain had converted the track from the main road up to the colony into a skiddy mudbank between two strips of bog, and although from a distance the place had looked solid, even pretty with its red roofs and Scotch firs and whitewash, once there I could only think of Martin Chuzzlewit in his American "Eden". Everywhere stretched a morass studded with shacks. In the middle of what may one day be the town square six undersized nags were swerving in the shafts of a battered country cart bogged above its axles. And leading to every shack was a depressing duckboard pathway. We might have been back on the Somme in the winter of 1916. The colony is laid out like a clock. The hour hand covers the farmhouses and buildings, the minute hand sweeps the farmland, and in the centre, where a start has been made with the communal buildings—a water-tower, the town hall and the like—we found a crooked signboard directing us to the headquarters of the colony.

Two of the committee received us—a Rumanian who had fled from pogroms in Bessarabia, and a really beautiful Irish-American matron who spoke English. She was sorry about the weather. "You must be thinking we are a fine lot of messers here," she said, "but you ought to have seen the place during our first winter. Then there *was* mud. And though you may not think it, we are getting along. And now I suppose you want to see round a bit." We paddled out into the slush along a duckboard. "I'm going to show you the kindergarten," she said. "It's in the block over there." "Block" was a euphemism: but the kindergarten was a revelation. It was a three-room bungalow, well roofed and warm, and on a wide verandah was a row of the smallest goloshes I have ever seen, flanked by four enormous umbrellas, the like of which I have only seen outside a smart London Golf Club. "When it's raining we can get six at a time under each, and so the children get here dry." There were perhaps thirty of them, all born since 1924 on the colony; and all were tidily, if simply, dressed, and all looked healthy. But what is really a tribute

to Zionism, all, whether their parents were Rumanians or Americans, Poles or Germans, spoke Hebrew as their mother tongue. That is a great feather in the Zionists' cap.

Then on through more mud to another "block" and the adult school. It was much more spartan than the kindergarten, but again the children looked fit and happy, and seemed to be enjoying a lesson on the geography of South America which was being given them in Hebrew by a young Pole in riding-breeches, who, in his spare time, as our hostess informed us, was the bee expert of the colony. Then on to the milk store and the Zionist agricultural college, where system certainly triumphed over squalor. We saw class-rooms and laboratories and dormitories and refectories, all on the most up-to-date lines. The Zionist *Haluzim* (pioneers) have certainly accomplished something in Nahalal, and youth is getting a chance.

When we were leaving, I asked our hostess what diversions there were for the elders of the colony. "Perhaps you get a little music?" I suggested, knowing that Jews love music. She smiled sadly. "No, not yet," she replied; "you see, our days are so full. All day the men are out in the fields or at the market, and we women have our houses to do—the cooking and the washing and the mending and the children to look after; and when night comes we are all so dead beat that we just sit until we go to bed. I don't know if you know it," she said, "but I know now that you can be too tired to enjoy anything—even music. But that's the way with pioneers always. We work for the future and we are doing our best for our children."

Leaving the colony, we picked up a passenger, a neatly dressed Jew from Jerusalem who was on holiday and visiting friends in the Colonies. He was rather naïvely surprised that we, as Englishmen, gave him, a Jew, a lift. "I thought you were Americans," he said. "Englishmen usually loathe Jews." And then he told us that he was a Hungarian and a house-decorator, and that he had been five years in Palestine. It was his first holiday, he said, but he was getting on fine, and could now afford a month off. We dropped him in Nazareth, and ourselves drove straight on through the town out to the Tiberias road, where we could lunch in peace, far from the importunities of the loathsome beggars who seem to comprise most of the population of the town. Finally we chose a spot high on the hills with a clear view north and south. To the south lay Nazareth in its steep valley—terrace after terrace



THE JUDEAN HILLS



SEA-LEVEL ABOVE THE LAKE OF GALILEE
"HIGH AND DRY IN THE HILLS"

of grey flat roofs with here a spire, there a minaret ; to the north, the softer, greener hills of Galilee ; and pocketed in a fold of olive groves the village of Cana where Christ changed the water into wine. These Galilean hillsides are fascinating, and after lunch we climbed a grey tor and smoked our pipes in peace. Then back into Nazareth itself to see the set pieces—the Church of the Annunciation and the Synagogue where Christ preached. But both were somehow tawdry, and we all three enjoyed far more our walk through the narrow stone-faced lanes of the markets. They led here, there, and everywhere, and colour was rampant—silks, copper-pans, oranges, beads, mother-of-pearl, and camel saddlery, all blending, and perfectly in tone with the granite of the houses and streets.

The last stage to Tiberias was without incident, save that we had another passenger, this time one of the old Jews, Talmudic and ringleted, but otherwise looking exactly like an Arab. Also he spoke Arabic and not Hebrew. But he was pleasantly patriarchal in his conversation, though, like our Hungarian friend, he seemed surprised that we had taken him on board. So we were a happy party and the country itself became almost homelike. Indeed, much of it might have been the Chilterns with steep smooth sides to the hills and thick ribbed shadows and long flat hill-tops. And so on, up hill and down hill, until at last the Lake of Galilee opened below us. I say below us, but actually I mean below the world. For where we halted, there was on the roadside a notice in the three official languages—English, Hebrew, and Arabic—saying that here where we were, high and dry in the hills, was sea level. The Jordan valley is as odd a phenomenon as the great rift in Kenya.

In Tiberias old Isaac, our passenger, tapped me on the shoulder, asking to be let down, and produced a two piastre piece as his fare. He was quite dumbfounded when we refused it and thanked him for the pleasure of his company. After settling into our hotel, the three of us went down to a café on the shores of the lake for a cup of coffee and, of course, a bootshine. There were six applicants for our custom, for bootblackening is the most popular profession of the Palestinian youth ; and while our shoes were being restored to something like their proper condition, a blind Arab, guided by a little child, came and squatted down beside us. He was a ballad-monger, and sang the song of the blind lover who has never seen the maid of his choice. He sang beautifully in

queer quavering cadences, and though, where we were, we might have been on the Italian Lakes, he gave just the right touch of Orientalism to the atmosphere. Later Roy and I walked along the lake, and Cambridge scaled a mountain—he loved scaling mountains—and after an excellent dinner at the hotel we all sat outside, supremely content, with the lake dark like polished asphalt below us, and the quarter-moon sinking yellow behind the Galilean hills to the west.

CHAPTER XI

INTO SYRIA

NEXT day was our last in Palestine, but before starting north for Syria we drove along the lake shores to see where the Jordan begins its long steep descent to the Dead Sea. And, of course, we were at once accosted for a lift. This time the applicant was a man of vast ideas. Were we the mail for Baghdad? Were we working on the new desert railway? In any case, would we give him a lift to Iraq, and what would we charge? He was both surprised and disgusted when we told him there was nothing doing. But another mile on we did take a passenger, a young German Jew, who told us proudly that he was a *Wirtschaftler* (farmer) in one of the new Jewish colonies just south of the lake. He came from Halle, which both Cambridge and I knew, and at once he plied us with homesick questions. Did we know this, and did we know that? It was rather touching. And then he seemed to pull himself together. "But I love Palestine," he said; "especially in the spring. Then everything grows and the flowers are lovely. But the summer is awful with its mosquitoes, and I'm full of malaria." He looked it, and he looked tired too. "We work far harder here," he added, "than we did in Germany." But when we asked him about his Arab neighbours, he merely shrugged his shoulders and said that his colony kept to itself and had suffered a lot in the riots of 1929. Eventually, of course, talk drifted to the war. "I was too young to fight," he said, "but I do remember that there was nothing to eat in Halle. It's strange," he added. "My father was killed fighting against you, and now I am a Palestinian and have a British passport."

The Jordan was well worth our visit. It was in full spate, swirling brown between its heavily treed banks, and all of us longed for a rod. It looked full of fish. And, being curious, we sought local enlightenment from a group of Galilean fishermen whom we found sitting and mending their nets

on the bank. Their reception of our overtures was anything but Apostolic. All they did was to scream for *baksheesh*, and when I refused—quite as loudly—their language was unprintable. And then the rain started, and to my disgust I discovered that my waterproof had dropped out of the back of the car somewhere on the road. I was very cross, and when we stopped to photograph the Thermal Baths a mile short of Tiberias, where the Tiberiads wash themselves once a week—half a piastre a time and no mixed bathing—I aired my grievance to the dignified old Arab who keeps the coffee shop attached to the Baths. He quickly brought things back to their proper perspective. "Why are you angry?" he said. "You have merely been careless; and if you are careless, you deserve to lose things. As a matter of fact, you ought to be glad. For of those who go up and down this road all day, few, if any, have ever had an overcoat; and now one at any rate is happy, and you have had a valuable lesson." I have seldom felt so chastened before.

We drove through Tiberias without stopping and on along the beautiful lake road. The rain had ceased, but the sun refused to shine; still, even so, it was lovely. There were flowers everywhere—anemones, red, white and purple; here a field of tiny wild cyclamen, there a patch of dwarf daffodils; and great clumps of fennel—yellow-crested like the secretary bird and with a stem as strong and thick as an artichoke stick. And low fleecy clouds caressed the hill-tops and the air was soft; and in the rich bogland on either side of our track men were ploughing with the same wooden ploughshares which Isaac and Jacob used; and on the hillsides twentieth-century Davids were minding flocks of very skittish goats. We gave one urchin the first bit of chocolate he had ever eaten. At first he thought it was earth and jibbed; then he licked it and all was well. And so, climbing steadily, we left the lake behind us, passed another sea-level signpost standing stark in the middle of a brown moorland, and gradually it became colder and colder, and at last we were in clouds which robbed us of a sight of snow-capped Hermon. Everywhere among the grey boulders there were flocks of stringy-looking cattle and very athletic sheep; but all the shepherds carried ludicrous German umbrellas! They were terrible blots on the landscape.

Once over the watershed between Galilee and Lake Huleh the mist thinned, and below us, stretching miles—wide miles—into the north was the plain and the lake where the Jordan



BY THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN
FISHERMEN MENDING THEIR NETS



NOONTIDE ON THE LAKE OF GALILEE

risers ; and far away high on the farthest hillside we could see the tidy trees of the old Jewish colony of Roshpina, where we tackled the Palestinian customs and had our passports stamped for exit. Then on again with our track hugging the hillside, and below us the top waters of the Jordan, crossed by the Bridge of the Daughters of Jacob, where the road forks to Damascus. But here was no moorland isolation. Cattle were being watered in boulder-lined bog-pools. There were villages everywhere and people everywhere ; and the villages and the people were one as curious as another. Life here is nomadic in an odd way. In the winter all the valley becomes a swamp ; in the summer it is lush pasture. So the villages are portable and are pitched like tents with the rise and fall of the water ; and the huts, instead of being covered with the ordinary brown camel-hair tenting, are made of long strips of roughly woven matting laid one over the other like cards in a card-house. They look rather like squat beehives.

The people were wild and rather frightening. When we stopped to photograph one village, at least fifty herded round us and insisted on being photographed, and that I should be in the group—for safety, I suppose. But when the time came for us to move on, they were unpleasantly loth to let us go. They held on to the car, some tried to clamber on board, and all demanded cigarettes. I had only five left, the others had none, and for a moment there was uncomfortable pandemonium. But when in doubt, *divide et impera*. I took one of the five cigarettes and lit it myself, and then, singling out a son of Anak among the crowd, I gave him the other four to do with them what he liked. At once all the rest swarmed on him like bees round a queen. But he was well able to look after himself. Hitting out right and left, he made an avenue through the mob and was off up the hill to his village in great bounds like a stag with all the rest after him in full cry. We promptly slammed in our gears and were off and away as quick as lamplighters.

It was a stiff climb out of the valley, and soon we were back in the mist, and finally the storm became so bad that we halted in a eucalyptus grove for lunch, which we ate in the car, watched stolidly by three heavily cloaked Arab shepherds under their ridiculous umbrellas. Then on again, and another passenger—a young Jewish policeman with a rifle and full equipment and bound for the last Palestinian frontier post at Metulla, which he was joining for the first time. We passed a mounted Arab patrol—also Government policemen—and

our Jew became at once voluble. "You British pay us and your own British policemen rottenly," he said; "but those Arabs get all that they want. It's a scandal. No Arab, whether he is a policeman or not, ought ever to be given arms. They are all cut-throats and brigands and ought to be wiped out."

The last stages of our road in Palestine were, as Roy and I said to each other, excellent practice for the Persian passes ahead of us. For the road was a slightly improved goat-track with sudden gradients which were a real rest both for our cumbersome lorry and also for Roy at the wheel. He drove magnificently; but all of us were vastly relieved when we topped the pass and were safely in Metulla village, where we dumped the Jewish policeman. It was an awful place, slung like a girth across a saddleback, and bleak and wind-swept and inexpressibly dreary. We drove slowly through its one wide straight and untidy street, and ten minutes later drew up in front of a barbed-wire barrier thrown across the road where Palestine ended and Syria began.

In Haiffa some well-meaning but extremely ill-informed friends had told me of a perfect mountain village just over the frontier facing Mount Hermon where we would find an excellent hotel. So, once through the French customs, which were both efficient and agreeable, we started off into the mountains for Merj Ayun; but when we found it, there was not, and never had been, an hotel. A pleasant French officer offered us two bare rooms for the night, but added that, in our place, he would push on to the Mediterranean coast and Sidon. It was only sixty miles; the road was good; we would be there easily by nightfall; and he would telephone ahead to the Hôtel de Phénicie, where we would find all we wanted. So back we turned on our tracks almost to the frontier post, and then embarked on the long steep descent from the Lebanon into the valley of the River Litani.

It was a grand drive on a splendidly graded road, round all sorts and conditions of contours, rising and falling like the mercury in a thermometer. Great beetling granite cliffs, scored with brown torrent beds, towered above us; the mountain-tops were spattered with Crusader ruins; and, dominating everything for miles, the great derelict mass of Belfort Castle standing out wildly against the stormy sky. And all round us the roar of water hurling itself down the mountain-sides to feed the Litani, which rolled in wild brown spate hundreds of feet below. Just before sunset we got our first glimpse of the Mediterranean stretching grey and wild

into the west, and, as our petrol was running low, we stopped to fill up. Four jolly little Syrian boys watched us noisily and, when we were finished, begged for the tins. But as there were only two tins and four children, we organized an Olympiad. Cambridge held the four urchins in leash by the car, while I went perhaps a hundred yards down the road with the two tins and put them out in full sight of the pack. And then Cambridge dropped the flag and they were off. Then a wild breathless scamper, then shouts of victory and disappointment, and finally a set prize-giving. But the greatest fun of all was that there we were playing games with unknown Syrian children in a place which none of us could find for certainty on our map.

The rest of the drive was tiring and dreary. Darkness fell, and when we joined the coast road it was thronged with scorching over-lighted cars, madly driven and hooting on our tail round every corner. Half-baked civilization is as dangerous as it is exasperating, and we all heaved a sigh of relief when the lights of Sidon appeared.

CHAPTER XII

ALI, THE LEMONADE-SELLER

SIDON is a rabbit-warren of a place, and our first attempt to find the Hôtel de Phénicie ended in a narrow cul-de-sac where we almost ran over a black Senegalese policeman. He was furious, but reinforced by *baksheesh*, he condescended to help us, and in his charge I went off alone on foot. But he never brought me to the hotel. He didn't know where it was. So, after giving him a few sharp words, I sought another guide in a chemist's shop. The proprietor was unable to leave his business to help me, but he came to the door and screamed for one Ali. Whereupon there appeared out of a café next door a huge Turk with a fine moustache and six days' growth of beard on his chin and wearing a pair of fascinating Bashi Bazouk trousers, very full-bottomed and tricked out for fun with brilliant vermilion braid embroidery over the hips. He was duly introduced as "Ali, the Lemonade seller", and at once he brought me to the hotel. But the proprietor was out. However, all the guests—most of whom were already in their nightgowns—assured me that there was lots of room, and back I went to rescue Roy and Cambridge, whom I found almost submerged in a boisterous crowd. Ali at once created order out of chaos: for he could kick as well as box; and, although he looked incredibly down-at-heel and his finery had known very much better days, he was obviously a respected and powerful member of Sidon society. We backed the car through the crowd to the hotel, where we found the proprietor, also in his nightgown, waiting to receive us, and I asked for accommodation—three rooms. "Three rooms? But you are only three men, and all my rooms have at least three beds in them" I explained that we preferred to sleep alone. He scratched his head, and then suddenly light dawned. "Oh," he said, "I understand. You're English." What he understood I neither knew nor cared; so I clinched the agreement with a smile and sent Ali below once more to rescue Roy

and Cambridge from another frightful crowd, and to get our gear up to our rooms.

So much accomplished, and still accompanied by Ali, who by now was my bosom friend, we went off to garage the car for the night. That was easy ; but the question of food was less simple. The Hôtel de Phénicie was "beds only". What did Ali suggest ? "My aunt's cousin," he said, "has a very good restaurant, and you are my friends." And in we went. The restaurant was an ill-lit niche opening unprotected on to the street : it smelt of soot and oil ; and Ali's aunt's cousin was infinitely dirtier than Ali himself ; but we ordered a meal to be ready in half an hour and, still chaperoned by Ali, returned to the hotel to tidy up. Ali watched every detail of my toilet in deeply interested silence, and then mustered us again and, walking ahead like a sergeant-major, escorted us to the hole in the wall. There he deposited us at a table for three, while he stationed himself alongside at another table on guard. It was a good thing that we were all very hungry and very tired, for the food, of which there was lashings, was of the type which one would describe as difficult. However, with our eyes half shut so as not to see too much, we succeeded in lining our ribs very adequately with a succession of more or less harmless messes. We washed them down with beer, and finally made an arrangement with Ali's aunt's cousin that he would bring us breakfast to the hotel in the morning at eight o'clock.

And then out into the streets for a walk round the town, which Ali insisted we must see. He was a first-class guide, and brought us to the Crusader Harbour, past the town mosque, and finally into the bazaars—miles and miles of crypt alleyways with long arched vistas and so many twists and turns that we would undoubtedly have lost ourselves had it not been for Ali. The place was thronged with buyers and Ali explained. "Sidon is a seaport," he said, "and the men are away fishing all day, so we have turned night into day for shopping. The booths open at six in the evening and close at three in the morning ; and then everyone, except the fishermen, sleeps until noon." He then drifted into domestic topics. "I married a Christian," he said. "She had first married my brother, who died ; but the family wanted to keep her dowry, so I took her on when I was fifteen. I have five boys—no girls, thanks be to Allah—and I am very pleased with her. She works well, but I don't want to have any more children. The lemonade trade is no good these days, and I make no

money at all. So I am very thankful that my brother died and that I got a rich wife." Then we fell to talking about the French, perhaps not as guardedly as was wise, and suddenly he tapped me on the arm. "Hush," he said. A procession was coming to meet us—some Senegalese police and about fifteen prisoners, handcuffed and looking very dejected. "There was a murder in the hills a week ago," said Ali. "They have taken all the men from the village until they find out who did it."

We were back in the hotel at ten, and Ali and the hotel proprietor—still in his nightgown—came to see me safely to bed. I had a septic finger, and asked their advice as to treatment. They were encyclopedias of knowledge and produced grand hot water and, while Ali held my hand, mine host probed with a needle and bathed. Then we iodined the wound and bound it up with a bit of what looked suspiciously like a strip of nightgown. Then I got into bed. But at once my feet came out at the bottom, as the end of the bedding was not tucked in. They were greatly upset, and proceeded to remake the bed with great thoroughness; and then at last, with many salaams, they left me. The bedclothes stayed on, but the bed itself was a bit of a problem. The bedding was poised carelessly on a wire mattress which rested precariously on a forest of tall and very dilapidated spiral springs, and whenever I moved the whole thing went off like a burst of machine-gun fire. But I got used to it and eventually slept—and never a bug or a flea.

In the morning it was a case of "*le Roi se lève*". Ali arrived at seven with lots of hot water; then the hotel proprietor—still in his nightgown—came to enquire after my health; and then a long discussion about breakfast. Ali's aunt's cousin was outside the door and apparently had forgotten all our instructions of overnight; for when I repeated them he looked absolutely blank and eventually he had to fetch a barber, who knew some French, to interpret. We got everything right except jam. For what I thought was the Arabic for jam is, in Syria, apparently the Arabic for cemetery; and this completely defeated them. However, eventually they understood "fruit", and, after first producing a tin of peaches, did get me a pot of marmalade. By then it was late and I was in a hurry to get dressed, and all retired discreetly, save Ali. He supervised every item of my toilet, and when I reached the stage of oiling my hair he broke into loud applause. "Beautiful," he said, "beautiful. You are indeed a Pasha."



A PERSIAN CARAVANSERAI



Everybody watched us at breakfast—Ali, the barber, Ali's aunt's cousin, and most of the other guests in the hotel; and when we had finished, Ali produced his eldest son, a seven-year-old bootblack, and he polished our shoes; and then, with Ali, out we went again into the town to take photographs. We again saw the port and the mosque and the now empty bazaars, and then Ali said that we must go and inspect the new Moslem school. Out of modesty we rather hesitated, but we had underestimated Ali's organizing powers. While we slept, he had seen the school authorities, had told them that we were very important English lords, and that we would visit the school in the morning. So when we arrived we were greeted not only by the head master, but by the school committee as well, and were then invited to make a thorough inspection. We saw babies being put through physical jerks—they were very jolly; and then we went from one classroom to another through all the standards, hearing arithmetic and geography and history; and finally, when we said that we really must go, a bell rang, and all the classrooms emptied out into the school-yard and all the scholars formed up in a square round us. First there was roll-call and the senior boy of each class brought the head master a list of the absentees for the day, whose names were read out; then the parade was called to attention with military precision; and then came the order to dismiss. The boys clicked their heels, raised both hands high above their heads, clapped them together, and said something which sounded like "Amen". And then at last we were free.

Ali was vastly pleased with our success, and on our way back to the hotel told me that our visit had greatly revived his fortunes. The hotel proprietor was paying him commission on our bill, so also his aunt's cousin, and so also the grocer who supplied the pot of marmalade; while he had already pocketed the money which we had paid his eldest son for blacking our boots. When we left him for Beirut half an hour later I bade him an almost affectionate farewell. Shaved, washed and patched, he would have made a perfect servant—half rogue, half devoted hound, full of interest and guile and always amusing. And his parting words of gratitude over my tip betrayed a poet in him. "Would you had come here a month later," he said; "Then all Syria will be rich with the smell of budding earth and the fragrance of blooming flowers. Spring is coming—and the lemonade season."

CHAPTER XIII

BEIRUT

NONE of us expected to enjoy Beirut, where the French are busily and most successfully converting what was a tawdry Levantine town into a Near Eastern version of Algiers; but it suited our purposes to stay there six days. For Cambridge and Roy wanted to make an expedition to Baalbek and Damascus, and I had work to do; and the days passed profitably for us all and even had their moments of distinct entertainment.

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I had never had a Turkish bath in the East, and I felt that my education was incomplete. But a first Turkish bath is rather alarming anywhere, and I knew no one in Beirut to show me the ropes. However, I was determined. And I was lucky. After three days I decided that the elderly Arab taxi-driver who was taking me about was sufficiently staid to chaperon me; and he was quite agreeable—at a price. "I'll call for you before midnight," he said as he pocketed his twenty-piastre tip. "The bath will be empty by then, and you don't want a crowd."

His name was Khalil, and the bath was in the slums through empty streets which became narrower and narrower until at last they ended in a blind alley at the end of which guttered a solitary lamp. It lit an archway, and we entered a narrow smelly corridor, stumbling uneasily in the pitch darkness. Then a door opened and an elderly gentleman wearing a towel, a thick woollen vest and *shib-shib* slippers, and with a haunting look of John Silver in *Treasure Island*, ushered us with many salaams into a large lantern-lit hall. In the middle tinkled a fountain, and all round it on a platform were divans covered with bright red cushions. And happily we were alone save for two young Bedouin who were in from the Hauran for a spree. They were undressing when we arrived, and I

couldn't help watching them almost fascinated as they shed one layer of clothes after another until I thought they would never be stripped. And then anticlimax. Clad in mere towels, they were no bigger than I was, and looked exactly as though they had shrunk in the wash.

When the four of us were ready, John Silver took us into the hot room. It was dim and romantic. The roof had three domes—the highest in the middle ; and each was studded with tiny glass windows, ovals and diamonds, which glittered from the moonlight outside and looked just like stars. The walls were tiled black and white, so also the floor ; and in the middle there was another fountain playing in an alabaster basin. All of us wore high wooden pattens, and went clickety-clack over the tiled floor like four ducks going to a pond. But the pattens were most necessary ; for the bath was heated by great open wood fires in the cellars directly below, and the bare tiles would have been far too hot for our naked feet. The four of us clattered over to an alcove, stretched ourselves prone on our towels just like over-fed Romans, and for a while there was dead silence. But at last the curiosity of the two Bedouin conquered their shyness and they began to question Khalil about me. My colour intrigued them. Compared with their brown skins, mine looked ivory-white—a grain of rice in a coffee-bean canister—and when I told them in my Arabic that when I had been in the Sahara my skin had gone just as brown as theirs, they squatted down opposite and poured questions at me which kept us going in fine style for twenty minutes.

By that time all of us had begun to perspire slowly—I slowest of all—but the slowness jarred on the two Bedouin, and to hurry things on they started feats of strength—lifting each other, cock-fighting, wrestling, tug-of-war—just like a pair of rowdy schoolboys, for all that both had told me that they each had growing families of their own. And they were absolutely natural. Of course they liked having me as an audience—all Arabs like audiences—but they weren't showing off, only enjoying themselves, and even when they shouted to me to watch them doing this or that, I didn't feel they were a bit bumptious. It was grand fun, and they got as hot as hot, and one after another departed to have their wash and rub-down. Khalil followed. Then my turn came.

At each corner of the hot room was a little curtained recess, and there I was taken over by an elderly bearded Arab who stretched me on the floor and, squatting up against me,

armed himself with a glove as rough as a rasp, and for ten minutes assaulted me super-violently all over. He took off a complete top-coating of skin, which sloughed off me in most unflattering rolls of black ; but he worked in a tense silence, which he broke once only to remark that if I came every day for a fortnight he could remove my stomach. I have no doubt that he would have been as good as his word. After the rubbing he gave me a rest and a bowl of water to dabble with, while he beat up some soapsuds in a huge porringer with a mammoth shaving-brush. Then, with the brush in one hand and the porringer in the other, he returned to the attack, and never have I been more thoroughly cleansed since the days when I was on Mary Jane's knee years ago in our Dublin nursery. Then he sluiced me all over with pannikins of very hot water from a bucket, and when all the soap was gone he gave me the pannikin and a fresh bucket of water to play with while he fetched John Silver I felt rather like a baby being given an indiarubber soother to keep it quiet.

John Silver brought warm towels, and when I had dried myself all over he led me into another room stacked with warm clean bath-sheets, and proceeded to dress me for the cool-down. I had two bath sheets, one round my waist stretching to my ankles, the other over my shoulders like a surplice. Then he twisted a small vivid yellow towel into a turban for my head, and wound a smart crimson binder round my waist over the surplice. In the end I was extremely pleased with my appearance.

And so back to the entrance hall and to my divan. Khalil and the two Bedouin were already on theirs, all smoking hubble-bubbles, and another, with the tobacco nicely glowing, was waiting for me. This was another first experience, but, tucking my legs under me like the other three, I sucked good and hearty, and, after several nervous chokes, found that I didn't feel sick. For the next hour the four of us sat in a row like Sultans, smoking, drinking coffee, eating macaroons and talking, while John Silver pattered round banking up our tobacco and filling our coffee-cups. Khalil and I left at three, and as we walked back to my hotel I told him how much I had enjoyed myself. "I expect you did," he said. "You obviously needed a bath. The washer told me you were filthy."

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I went to church on the Sunday. It has just been built, and stands beautifully almost in the sea ; and there was a

jolly country congregation with a fair sprinkling of Syrian Christians. But the service was conducted like a funeral, and I was almost asleep when the time came for the sermon. The preacher took for his text: "Lay not up for yourselves treasure upon earth. . . ." The only thing, he said, worth cultivating on earth was character. I applauded inwardly; but then the standard fell; and when he descended to saying that he was not attacking the rich—"for it is far harder to be rich than poor", I heard a Scottish voice behind me: "How on earth does he know?" Eventually I did sleep. But not for long. I woke with a start to find the preacher's eye glazed on me and his voice almost brazen. And this is what he was saying. "How do you know, my friends, when you go to bed at night, that next morning you will still be here to wear the clothes which you place so tidily on your chair? You may never wake: you may pass over in your sleep; and in a week another will be wearing your coat and your shirt and your trousers. Life is short, and life is only a passing phase in eternity. I remember an occasion when the Lord proved this to me. I was dining with a General whose name, if I gave it to you, would bring up memories of great feats in the war. It was a small dinner-party—only sixteen guests—and my host's servants were all ex-servicemen. We had reached the second course—the fish course—and an old Army Reserve man was just about to hand me the dish, when he suddenly fell dead behind my chair. I know he was a God-fearing man, for he had been in the Army, and that he was ready for his pass-over whenever the order would come. So his end was happy. To him it was the opening to a new and a larger life; but to us, of course, it was most inconvenient. For you know on such occasions how upsetting happenings of this nature can be . . ." I looked round, as I could no longer face the preacher with a straight face. My Scottish friend was fast asleep.

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The last evening before we left for the north the three of us were sitting after dinner on the hotel terrace drinking coffee, when we were joined by a curious robin-like little Englishman who at once engaged us in conversation. Soon we were deep in prophecy and theology. The Messiah, he said, was coming in two years, and by then all Jews would have become Christians. The first portent would be the defeat of the Antichrist, the Bolsheviks, who had an army of 20,000,000

men and women, all lusting to attack Jerusalem. They would be defeated, and then there would be a great earthquake which would split the Mount of Olives in two (Zechariah i, 1). Then the Mediterranean would flow into the cleavage and would inundate the Jordan valley and swallow the Dead Sea (Obadiah ii, 2). It would then stream out in a great canal to meet the Persian Gulf (Zephaniah iii, 3). And then Jerusalem would become the Clapham Junction of the world (Habakkuk iv, 4).

We listened with suppressed hysterics; and then he spoilt it all. We had taken up his point about converting all the Jews, of which we did not approve; but he said it was his life's work and he was succeeding. Only the other day, he went on, he had made one good convert, who had bought from him a piece of land on the Mount of Olives on which he himself had originally hoped to build a house; but his finances had not permitted the necessary outlay, and so he had put up the land for sale. We were horror-struck. "But," we said, "how unchristianlike to sell your piece of the Mount of Olives to a Jew! Couldn't you have sold it to a Christian?" He shrugged his shoulders. "The Christians would not give my price," he said; "and, anyhow, the Jew paid his money down, and said that he would think about becoming a Christian."

We hastily retired from the fray to discuss safer topics.

THE FAMOUS TRIPOLI MULE-BUS



CHAPTER XIV

TRIPOLI

BEIRUT, like Cairo three weeks earlier, wept to see us leave, and we started in threatening thundery weather with the clouds blotting out the crests of the Lebanon.

But it was grand to be on the road again, and, as our stage to Tripoli was short, we could take our time. Our first halt was at the Dog River, with its queer rock inscriptions recording the ebb and flow of invading armies from the days of the Assyrians down to Allenby in 1918. But for the next hour, with our road skirting the seashore and on our left the monotony of Lebanon scenery, we were frankly bored. The same red-roofed villages, the same pine-clad slopes, the same rather superior and very genteel and oily Lebanese—a picture-postcard atmosphere completely devoid of personality. For the Lebanon has got *Europeanitis* badly. But every now and then there were refreshing reminders that we were on an historic road. We halted again to photograph the ruin of a Roman bridge—a fine derelict monument—and then after crossing the Red River, which is still tinted with the blood of Adonis, killed in the Lebanon by a wild boar, we reached Byblos. It was well worth a long halt. Its castle is honey-combed with odd stairways, and we walked the way of the Crusaders, and from the roof of the keep had a glorious view in every direction. Then we visited the Phœnician graveyard with its sarcophagi and the few pillars surviving of what must have been a great temple; and then the Crusaders' church, a fine solid building of stately architecture, with three fine aisles and a beautiful chancel. It is now a Maronite church and the Maronites don't deserve it. They have whitewashed the interior almost out of recognition and everything looks very *déclassé*; and the oily old priest who showed us round kept putting out his hand for a tip without a flicker of shame. A really vile host.

We had meant to lunch in Byblos, but it was too early,

so we pushed on up the coast, and every mile we went we knew we were leaving the Lebanon behind us. It was grand country, and when we rounded Ras Shakka on a terrace road cut in the face of the cliff with a 200 feet drop below us into the Mediterranean, it was almost exciting. But past it the country opened into treeless plain, and it was twenty minutes before we found, by a tiny deserted police post, a young oak bursting into foliage where we could lunch in the shade. It was obviously a regular resting-place for all the toil-stained who plod that way. "At the Dukes Oak we meet." First an old Turk; then a black, baggy-trousered vendor of cakes; then a female with yearning eyes; and finally a whole family, mother, sisters, and a flock of children. All squatted down in a circle for rest and to enjoy the spectacle of our meal; and soon they began to talk—the usual nosy-parker cross-examination of the stranger. Where had we come from? Where were we going? Why? And later, when we had finished eating and Cambridge and I were washing up—it was our turn—all clustered round to watch us pack. We gave half a tin of bully beef to the mother of the family and she gave it all to her eldest son. She then explained, "He is our eldest born and the pride of our eyes," she said. "Whatever happens to the rest of us, he must be strong, and meat makes strength."

In another hour we were in Tripoli and enjoying ourselves; for Tripoli, after Beirut, is charmingly Oriental, the streets full of gay people, walking, talking, and eating and chaffering. But the proprietor of our hotel, "The Royal", could not share our pleasure. "This place," he said, "used to be far more thronged before the French came and starved us out to make Beirut what it is. But *Insha'allah* [please God], better times are coming." And he showed me a paragraph in a local paper announcing that it had finally been decided that the terminus of the pipe-line from the Kurdish oilfields in Iraq should be at Tripoli. "At last," he went on, "someone has shown common sense. Tripoli is the natural terminus for the pipe-line as well as for the new railway across the desert from Baghdad. Why, the Turks realized that sixty years ago and went so far as to engage English engineers for a railway survey. Of course, nothing more happened. The Turks were hopeless. But you do now sound like business, and what Tripoli needs is business."

Tripoli, like Athens, lies some five miles inland from its port, and we wanted to go to the port to see the British cemetery where the only seven bodies recovered after the



TRIPOLI THE POOL OF THE SACRED FISH



TRIPOLI THE SACRED FISH

(MUSEUM OF MODERN ART)

wreck of H.M.S. *Victoria* in 1893 are buried. I had been there already three years before, and then the place had been beautifully kept by an old Turk and was gay with flowers and shrubs. Now we found it horribly neglected. The gate had to be dug open; the graves were high with weeds; and, worse still, the memorial cross had been broken off at the stem, and the repairs were really indecent. What has happened is that the old Turk has died, and the new guardian, a very sycophantic young Syrian, regarded the cemetery only as a side line, and presented each of us with his trade card and suggested that if we wanted marmalade or sausages or petrol he was the man who would get us quick service and best quality.

On our way back into the town we met the famous Tripoli mule-bus. It had been bought cheap in London—I would be afraid to say how many years ago—and its roof accommodation was of the razor-back variety, and half price. And no wonder. The stairway leading to it had disappeared years ago, and to-day the roof-passenger climbs to his perch from the driver's seat like a gymnast.

There was just time before dusk to visit the Pool of the Sacred Fish, which lies two miles north of the town in the shadow of a Dervish monastery. The pool is wide and circular, and is fed by a mountain spring and gravel-bottomed; and the fish themselves need to be seen to be believed. There must be thousands of them in that pool, and when we fed them, they came up to the food in such masses that the top layer was actually out of the water. This is no exaggeration at all. There were four ducks swimming with them in the pool, but whenever they tried to get some of our bread, the pressure of the fish would at once be so great that the poor birds had no water for them to paddle their legs and were actually standing on fishbacks.

The story of the sacredness of the fish lies in the tradition that when the great heroes of Islam died on the battlefield, their souls entered the bodies of the fish, who are thus sacrosanct. The Dervishes look after them, and an old priest told us that when one of them was found floating dead on the top of the water, it was carefully collected, washed, and put in a white shroud and buried. They are never eaten for food. "Indeed," added the priest, "they would be dangerous to eat. When the French came, a Senegalese did catch one and take it away to eat it, but when he put it on the pan it jumped up and bit his eye out."

Our next stage to Latakia, where the black tobacco comes from, was short, so again we were not hustled for time ; and while Roy stayed to get the car ready, Cambridge and I climbed the Hill of Tripoli up a long slope of wide steps leading, like a pilgrims' way, to the ruined Crusader fortress—Raymond's Castle. Our guide was a coffee-shop keeper, and after much knocking and banging at the great gate a frowsy old Arab woman, who lives in some dungeon of old times and keeps the keys, let us in. All is now in ruins ; but with its dungeons, My Lady's walk, the kitchens, the keep, the stables, the knights' parlour, it is quite as perfect as Kenilworth or Ludlow ; and from the topmost bastion we had a perfect view up and down the coast and back into the Lebanon itself.

The river of Tripoli winds far below the walls, and lying in a pine forest hundreds of feet below us was a Dervish monastery which I had visited five years before. I wish we had had time to go there again, for I know Cambridge would have enjoyed the dancing Dervishes just as much as he enjoyed hill-climbing.

I had made sea-friends with a jolly Arab merchant on a little coastal steamer, and while we were held up for cargo in Tripoli Port, he had brought me to the monastery. Our way led through an olive grove, and under almost every tree great dogs—mostly black, and all fat—lay about sheltering from the sun. Now a fat dog is rare in Arab countries, where they are normally ill used. I was therefore greatly surprised to see my friend actually walking round them so as not to disturb their siesta, and in the end I asked him point plank to explain. "They are holy," he said ; "and this is Black Dog Grove. It belongs to them, and they belong to it. Hundreds of years ago a rich Arab of Tripoli was bitten by a black dog and became very ill, and in his agony he swore on the triple divorce that if Allah spared his life, never more should a black dog in Tripoli die for want of care. And he kept his word. When he recovered he bought this grove and placed it in charge of a Sheikh whose family still looks after the place. They sell the olive crops and with the proceeds look after any black dog which turns up." I am afraid that at this juncture I laughed. "You needn't laugh," he said, "it's quite true. Even the dogs know it ; and they say that if a stray dog which has a speck of colour in him other than black tries to pinch their food, the pure blacks of the place tear him to bits ; and if one puppy of a litter is not born coal-

black the mother promptly eats it." I do not vouch for this story, but this much I will say : most of the dogs I saw were unblemished black.

At the monastery we had to pay five piastres for admission before we were ushered into a wide courtyard in the middle of which tinkled a crystal fountain. Half the courtyard was in shade, and in the shade sat, cross-legged on a low daïs, a marvellous figure swathed in bright scarlet and wearing on his head a high purple hat pointed like a dunce's ; behind him, right and left, sat two woolly-headed images also swathed in scarlet ; and behind them again—erect and very tall—were two more scarlet figures. The row in front were playing tom-toms and the two behind were blowing on reeds. Our arrival was hardly noticed, as it coincided with the entry of a file of six Dervishes dressed in wide capes and pleated skirts which stood out stiff like a ballet dancer's from their strong thighs. They took up a position in a circle in the patch of sunlight opposite the musicians, and then the music suddenly stopped.

The scarlet figure on the daïs rose to his feet, the dancers bowed towards the centre of their circle, and the onlookers, who were heaped up all round the walls, applauded madly. Then the music began again and the dancers started dancing. That is to say, if by any chance of imagination what they did may be called dancing. Each performer, with his elbow well out, put his left hand on his hip and stretched his right hand full length above his head ; and then slowly the six of them began to pirouette with their heads tilted back until I thought their necks would break, and their eyes firmly fixed on the right hand above their heads. At first the music was slow, but gradually the beat quickened and the dancers' turns became whirls, until they were spinning round like tops. Their eyes became glassy, their breath came in noisy gasps, and foam appeared on their lips. But still they danced ; and the crowd, swaying on their hunkers, got more and more excited as, one after another, the actors began to reel. At last one showed obvious signs of collapse. There was a long "Aaah !" from the onlookers and a murmur : "He is beginning to see Allah." A minute later the man had tottered and lay flat on his back, his eyes sightless and his mouth covered with foam. An almost gruesome shout rose from the audience. "Allah ! Allah ! He has seen Allah !" And in a second everyone was rushing at the fallen figure and sweeping the foam from his mouth and carrying it madly to their own.

"Allah ! Allah ! He has seen Allah ! Allah is great and Mohamed is his prophet !"

I was nearly sick, and fled. My friend looked at me anxiously. "I say," he said, "you're quite pale : do you feel ill ? You shouldn't have let yourself be carried away like that. They're as mad as the moon, and it's only a farce." "But the foam," I said ; "and those disgusting creatures. They ate it." He laughed. "They're madder than the dancers. Do you know, those people will walk every week from Tripoli to see the same show, so that they can boast that they too have seen Allah. The Dervishes don't mind. They get the entrance fees. Dervishes are rare good business men."

The coffee-stall keeper had never seen the Dervish dance, and thought that the spectacle had been banned by the French. I hope it has.

CHAPTER XV

TO ALEPPO

NORTH of Tripoli we were on the great Syrian caravan route from Anatolia and Aleppo down to the markets of Damascus ; and, though motors are now everywhere, the camels are still busy. We met two long strings, the first we had seen since Palestine, plodding along easily and tirelessly with a donkey leading each file to see that the pace was not too fast nor too slow. And spring was in the air, and nomad life was moving, and moving gaily—the men in big cloaks and on their heads either the fluttering Arab *kufiyeh* with its rope-like *agal*, or a funny high-domed brown felt skull-cap which made them look exactly like Grock. We were right clear of the conventional Lebanon.

As usual we had a passenger—a sad-faced man who had been to Tripoli to see the French about a lawsuit. When we put him down, he, like Isaac of Tiberias, offered money. I refused, but asked him if I might take his photograph. He agreed rather nervously, and when I was taking the picture I could hear him under his breath reciting some liturgy or other—presumably to avert the evil eye. I felt rather ashamed. It was bad manners on my part.

For years after the French occupation the Alouite State was in revolt, and cost the Mandatory much blood and treasure before the district was finally pacified ; but we now reaped the good harvest of the war. For those military operations had demanded improved communications, and our road was smooth and easy, and long before we had intended we were in Tartus, another Crusader stronghold, where we had intended to lunch. There was not much to see except a fine Basilica which the Turks had used as a mosque and which the French have now registered as an historical monument ; but—rather scandalously, we thought—the carving over the great west door has been removed *en bloc* to Paris. At least so we were told by an Armenian who spoke English well and

had been in British service in Cyprus, and after that had worked fifteen years in America. But he was an unsavoury type, and was, I think, in the secret service of the French High Commissioner in Beirut. The rest of the day continued good through fine open country of rich cultivation and slow-rising hills, with frequent rivers to cross and every now and then, high in the mountains flanking the coastal plain to the east, the silhouette of a Crusader castle.

Lattakia produced an extraordinary hotel, with rooms no larger than bathrooms which positively shrieked for Keatings. Each opened on to a public verandah, and next morning I was awakened by a man looking into my window. He gave me quite a fright. His enormous moustache was tightly clamped in an elaborate aluminium hair-curler, and at first sight he looked like the Man in the Iron Mask. I believe the Kaiser wore a similar machine when his moustaches used to frighten the world so much. Overnight our dinner had been odd—pellets of black charred meat on skewers and raspberry jam and curdled milk. Our breakfast was odder still. The eggs were raw, and instead of butter we were given some soul-destroying cheese in a state of liquefying putrefaction, and our coffee tasted of sugared onions. And then the bill. The proprietor of the hotel was cook, cashier, boots, and waiter in one. When he had served our meal, he put on his spectacles, mounted a desk like a throne, started a hubble-bubble, and asked us to register in the hotel book. Cambridge took the pen first and gave the full details required—his name, his father's and mother's name, where he was born, where he lived, and why everything and anything. That took five minutes, and the cashier was slightly impatient. So when Roy and I followed, he told us that it would be good enough if we wrote our names only and that he would put dots under what Cambridge had written in the other columns, as we might just as well have his parents as our own, and time was precious. And then the bill. It was extremely small and extremely entertaining. He calculated it on an abacus, slipping the coloured balls across the guitar-like wires with great speed and a jolly clatter, and writing nothing at all. We paid, and then, in one fell swoop, tipped the cook, cashier, boots, and waiter. A very convenient hotel.

It was raining outside, and we eyed the prospects of the day to the east with some concern ; for the mountains between us and Aleppo were heavily shrouded in mist. For two hours we climbed slowly out of the empty plain, but once in the

hills we began to meet other road travellers. I would not have liked to have met them on a dark night. They were wild mountainy folk riding on camels and donkeys and horses to their summer camping-grounds, their flocks and herds pattering along with the women and children behind them; and no one returned our salaams. And soon the country became as wild as the people. In the plain the river had been a wide placid stream, now it raged between narrow cliffs, in which our road was but a terrace cut into the sheer rock. And still we climbed. And all round us an absolute emptiness—no cultivation, only a rare charcoal-burner's village. And then suddenly the shock of two pedestrians—the first humans we had seen for half an hour. They were diffident in accepting our offer of a lift, expecting that they would have to pay; but when they realized that we were indeed heaven-sent benefactors, we at once became notables (or madmen) in their eyes and their tongues gradually loosened. They were on their way to bury a relative in a distant village—they might have been Irish peasants on their way to a wake—and while they were explaining their complicated relationship to the corpse, we overtook two more of the family also plodding to the funeral. One was a brother of the dead man and at once our two asked us to stop. The brother, they said, as a nearer relation, was the most bereaved, and therefore deserved the greatest consideration; and then, without any fuss at all, one of them—the man more remote in relationship—got down and gave his place to the brother. It was rather touching. But the brother's curiosity quickly swamped his grief, and soon we were discussing the world from China to Peru.

"You've come from Cairo?" he asked. "How big is Cairo? As big as Aleppo? It is twice as big? Why, it must be the biggest town in the world?"

I told him that I lived in London, and that London was five times as big as Cairo.

"*Ya Salaam*," he said. "What a town! Is it near Cairo?"

This was rather a poser; but I did my best.

"My friend," I said, "if you were to travel by camel to Cairo, it would take four months; but if you were going to London, you would be more than two years on the road."

"But where is it, then?"

I pointed over my shoulder. "Away to the West behind the sunset," I said.

By this time he had completely forgotten about his brother and had become the globetrotter pure and simple.

"Will you take me there with you?" he asked. "I would like to journey to behind the sun."

"Alas, no," I said. "Our road lies east, and we are going to meet the sunrise beyond the desert and across the rivers to Baghdad and then away over the mountains to Iran [Persia]. It will be four months before we see London again."

He sighed deeply.

"Of a truth," he said, "you are the fortunate ones. I wish I were going to Iran to see where the sun rises and back to London to see where it sets. Indeed, the English are everywhere."

Then he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a mist-shrouded valley opening into the mountains across a roaring torrent. "My brother lies over there. We will get down. We are very grateful."

By this time we were above the tree line and out in a country of rock and heath, and in the driving rain the place had its natural setting and looked magnificent. But it was also cruel. Suddenly a thunderstorm burst over our heads. The lightning seemed to crack on the rocks, and then there was a cloudburst. We had to stop—the deluge blotted out everything; and when, five minutes later, the storm had passed as quickly as it had come, we were marooned in a country alive with water—red torrents, red as henna, white torrents like boiling milk, and when the two met to pour over a precipice the fall was a solid arch, a *café-au-lait* buttress, so strong that it looked as static as ice-cream. We were drenched, of course, and cold, and driving became treacherous—and then terrifying. We were over the mountains and a thousand feet below lay the wide water-logged plain of the Orontes—the *Bahr el Asi* of the Arabs; and for the next half-hour we zigzagged wildly down to Jisr el Chagour, where stands the only bridge for miles. It is the only bridge I have ever crossed which wasn't straight. Not only that, but it has got not one twist, but many twists, and indeed meanders across the river just like a haphazard country lane. It is of stone, and its arches are low, and the water seemed to rise up like a wall almost to the level of the parapet, and we felt like the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea.

Beyond, the country rose slowly in long easy sweeps with miles of grazing-country undulating in all directions, and a soil which was red and rich. And to our relief the clouds began to lift, and a patch of blue sky showed miles ahead; and at last we were out into highlands, which we knew would continue unbroken until we reached Aleppo. Stray villages

huddled like forts on the high ground: there were olive groves in the valleys: and in every direction as far as the eye could see the prairie was intensely cultivated in wide strips—green, olive, brown and yellow, with here and there a great splash of poppies looking like bloodstains.

And once again we were Good Samaritans. Our new passenger was a young open-faced Arab of twenty-three who was in the dairy business and had with him great brimming bowls of curdled milk to sell in the markets at Aleppo. When we said that we were English, he became reminiscent "I was but a child," he said, "when you were here, but in those days our purses were full and our bellies well lined." And then, inconsequently, he asked us what we did with our wives while we were away. He was greatly surprised that I was unmarried, and was not impressed by my excuse that I had failed to find a suitable mate. "You could always buy one," he said; "I bought mine three years ago, and she is a good wife. She has given me a son and a daughter. You do not know how nice it is to be married." Then, inconsequently again, he switched over to soldiering. "A poor stupid job. It produces nothing but trouble. Look at those people." By this time we were nearing Aleppo and had overtaken a battalion of French Colonial troops straggling, French fashion, all over the road. "Those blacks," he said, "are silly people and terrible with women. When they got drunk, they used to rape our wives, so we killed them; and then the French bought them a lot of other women from over the sea and put them in houses, and now the blacks go there, *El Hamdu-lillah* [Thank God]."

Our arrival at Aleppo was perfect. It lies in a vast plain, and in the centre lies the citadel—a wild Saracenic pile perched on a pimple of a hill, rising almost artificially out of the dead flatness. "And," said our friend, "do you know why Halep is called Halep? When Saladin conquered the town, the servant who washed his clothes was called Halep, and the first order that Saladin gave after he had taken the place was to have his clothes washed. So he called the place after his washerman."

And so on into the town, which I had not seen since 1919, when I was there on duty before the British evacuation. Then it was a dusty rubble heap: now it is a town of streets and order; and the office where I used to try to investigate Armenian reports of Turkish atrocities, is the local depot of Singer sewing-machines. And there are trams everywhere, and one-way traffic, and great advertisement hoardings. Saladin would surely faint to see this product of French method.

CHAPTER XVI

ALEPPO

CAMBRIDGE had friends in Aleppo, and after leaving him at their house we sought and found the most wonderful guest-house I have ever known. It was in the Armenian quarter, and to reach it we had to invade a narrow cobbled street, arched over at intervals to keep the houses on one side from falling over on to the houses on the other, and so narrow that there was only a foot to spare on either side of the lorry. And the walls on both sides were absolutely blank save for heavily barricaded doors level with the roadway, and in the upper story perhaps one tiny grilled window—a peephole to see who knocked. We knocked; a tiny wicket was opened high in the iron-studded door; a voice asked our business; we explained; and the door opened. Once inside, I gasped in sheer delight. I was in a courtyard surrounded by buildings, and in the middle of its marble pavement a fountain played. Round it were orange and lemon trees, and there were pigeons everywhere, and the wall at one end was recessed with a great archway, roofed with stalactic tracery and as beautiful as any I have ever seen in Cairo or elsewhere. And so to our bedrooms. They were on the first story, and from the courtyard we climbed narrow stone steps, like pulpit stairs, out on to a roof terrace off which they opened. I had the largest bedroom I have ever had. The floor was in tiers: one was level with the door, the second was furnished as a sitting-room, and on the third were two beds. Behind the beds was a sort of reredos of carved wooden panels, pierced in the centre by a door leading into a fascinating little *cabinet de toilette* full of cupboards. The whole apartment was as long as a cricket pitch: the ceiling was a painted arabesque; and to light me, there were twelve windows in two rows one above the other. I felt like a king.

We brought the car down to the Ford agent, who turned out to have been a clerk of mine in 1919; and then, back once

more in the guest-house, we took our tea under the arched recess in the courtyard. And then baths were ready, piping hot, and warm bath towels for each of us each about the size of mainsails. Our host took dinner with us and was entirely delightful. We talked and talked—all the gossip of Aleppo, the marrying and giving in marriage, the dowries and the divorces, the ups and downs of commercial life. Monsieur wisely lives apart from politics. His aim is comfort and good company, and he runs his guest-house to ensure himself of both. He is fairly rich, and the house, which was built by his grandfather, and which, he assured us, was a veritable fortress with two stories of cellars below the courtyard where he could store food for two years, now belonged to him. His family had always been in business, and as a youth he had learned his trade in the Avenue de Pera in Constantinople as a seller of the famous Aleppo silks. And he did so well that at the age of twenty-five he was able to retire to Paris, where he lived *en grand seigneur*.

"Je m'habillais en prince ; costumes anglais, chemiserie de soie, des bijoux, le frac après cinq heures le soir, un joli petit appartement en garçon—enfin une vie de liberté et de licence. But the war caught me in Aleppo, and they all but took me as a Turkish soldier. Three times I was called up, but each time I saved myself by bribery. Then the fourth time I said to myself, 'I will bribe no longer, I will hide. Why should I become a soldier—least of all a Turkish soldier? I am a *grand seigneur* and loathe soldiering, and Turkish soldiers are never fed. What would I do without my good food? I would be dead in ten days.' So I got away from Aleppo to Beirut, did not report to the police, and hid, bribing whenever it was necessary. But nothing happened. At the end of the war I came back here, opened my silk-shop again, and made lots of money out of the English. You did have a lot of money. Then you went, and the French came, but they had no money. So I liquidated and got out of business with most of my fortune. And here I am in my own house still a *grand seigneur*, and only an hotel-keeper because I like to have around me *le monde chic*, like you. I enjoy housekeeping, and my kitchen is the best in Aleppo. I enjoy cleanliness, and my bath-room is modern, and water is laid on in the W.C. So I give you a romantic home and first-class food, and you give me fifty Egyptian piastres a day. I share your elegant company and you share my comfortable life. So we are both happy.'..."

A remarkable man.

I went to bed at ten, and in the dim light my room looked positively royal. And then I was suddenly transported home. Close by was an Armenian church with a chime of bells which played a tune with a refrain which had the lilt of a West Country folksong and ended in a delicious minor cadence. Of course I dreamed. And in my dream I talked to a condemned murderer in his cell. He was pinioned, and in five minutes he would be dead. He turned to me. "Funny, isn't it," he said, "when that bell tolls to say I am dead, you will hear it, but I shan't." And then he walked out to his death, and in a minute the bell tolled. It was the chime of the Armenian church, and it was four o'clock in the morning. Monsieur's company had been excellent, but his food had obviously been too much for me after our picnic rations on the road.

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Twenty miles out of Aleppo our road branched into the north and we were out on the old Roman way to Antioch. In Roman times Antioch for four centuries enjoyed the reputation of being the third greatest city in the world after Rome and Alexandria. Ben Hur ran his chariot race in its great stadium; Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey visited the town; and it was the foremost Roman military garrison in the Near East and the sally-port of the legions on their way to attack the Parthians and other invaders from the East. Of the old Roman road long stretches still survive—great broad terraces metalled with enormous granite setts and standing up above the level of the countryside like flat walls; and all along its length there are still ruins to remind us of Imperial Rome. Castles and fortresses, arches and outposts—the Gate of the Winds (*Bab el Howa*), My Lady's Tower (*Kasr el banat*)—everywhere the spirit of past greatness, and Cambridge and I were in our element. The road which the French have made was superlative, and Roy at the wheel was at last able to let the car out and to enjoy the thrill of thirty and even forty miles an hour. To start with our way lay among hills, stony and barren like Judea; beyond them we entered a vast plain waterlogged and depressing like the Struma valley. It too had its Roman remains—the Bridge of Iron (*Jisr el Hadid*), where the village women drawing water from the river turned their backs on us with utter contempt. And then on once more into mountains until we reached Antioch. It was a complete anticlimax. In

the town, which is just a second-rate Turkish provincial hamlet, there are no traces left of Roman greatness, only far up the hillside the remains of the Roman wall which surrounded the metropolis are still to be seen.

We were bound for Milton's "Daphne by Orontes", nine miles outside the town, where the Roman aristocracy used to retire in the summer, much as our own Indian officials retire to Simla in the hot weather. We lunched by the roadside and afterwards explored the Daphne Gorge. The river is fed by springs high up the mountain-side: there are waterfalls everywhere which still work countless corn-mills; and the view of one cascade after another, falling madly into great shaded pools, was wonderful. Spring was stirring; the trees were in bud; the birds were mating and singing; and we took photographs and talked to the millers—mostly fine old men like Moses and Aaron. Life was very good indeed.

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After breakfast Roy and I were taken to the oddest Old Curiosity Shop I have ever seen. It belongs to an old Sheikh by name Tunsi, a Tunisian Arab, as his name implied. He was a most picturesque type. He had been to Mecca and wore the green turban; his clothes were the normal endless layers of cloaks and nightgowns; and his hands were beautifully manicured and clean, so also his feet. And when he sat, which he did on his hunkers, he kicked his slippers off. His strong square moustache and beard were dyed raven black, and his cunning old eyes gleamed keen behind enormous gold-rimmed spectacles. His shop was an appalling litter of junk. There were four rooms, all of them small, and all were cluttered up with anything and everything: candlesticks and dishes; a heap of old clothes beside a revolting mummy which he said had been smuggled from Egypt; trays of beads and rings; china of all sorts and descriptions—decanters of Dewar's whisky, lamps, bits of pottery and tiles; Waterbury watches; carpets; pieces of embroidery; an egg-boiler from Birmingham; and an American fountain-pen. Some were on the floor, others on shelves, others piled one on top of the other, some on masharabeyeh stools and mother-of-pearl inlaid jewel-boxes—a *macedoine* of junk in an atmosphere which reminded me entirely of Fagan's den in *Oliver Twist*.

Sheikh Tunsi is a sort of public buyer of white elephants and stray finds, and of course all round Aleppo there are

any amount of finds from Roman days. I don't know what the French antiquity laws are, or whether in the Aleppo province finding is keeping, and I don't want to suggest that the Sheikh was a receiver of stolen goods. All I can say is that, while we were there, there was a continuous stream of visitors—all Arab *fellahin*—and each would produce from the folds of his cloak some antique or other which he meant to be seen by the Sheikh and no other. Their attitude towards him was highly deferential. Each knocked at the door for admittance, and, before crossing the threshold, took off his shoes and left them on the verandah outside. And then the bargaining. It was very short. The man stated his price; the Sheikh offered one-third; the man complained; whereupon the Sheikh handed back the goods with a shrug of his shoulders. Then there would be wild protests from the man, and eventually he would hand back the object to the Sheikh, who pulled out a large cotton bag full of money and poured it into his lap and paid the man. With us he was equally offhand. "Take it or leave it". I bought a glass plate inlaid with blue enamel and a brass signet ring set with a tiny seal of a Roman head, and when we were leaving I thanked him for receiving us. He was coldly polite. "Life is a chapter of bargains," he said. "I buy and sell, and sometimes the bargain is good and sometimes it is bad. So it is in real life."

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After dinner we were invited to visit an old Venetian family settled for centuries in the town. Their house lay in the heart of the bazaars, which were dark and eerie, and after a long walk we came to a huge door set in a blank wall and were admitted into a dim moonlit courtyard. From it a stone staircase led on to a wide terrace laid out as a garden and studded at intervals with square railed enclosures. They were actually pits opening down to another garden below. For this Venetian garden was in two stories, like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. And in the moonlight the great trees rising from the lower garden above the level of our terrace stood out magnificently against the sky. Beyond the garden opened what looked like a grassland paddock where some sheep were feeding, save that every here and there breaking the level of the grass were little glass turrets looking like nightlight shades. They were windows lighting the arched bazaars below. For the paddocks and the sheep actually existed on the roof of the markets.

Inside, the house was superb with fine saloons and ante-chambers and beautiful mediæval furniture, and we were received with real old-world grace. The head of the family, the widowed mother, sat on a sofa, and one by one we were brought up for formal introduction. Then life became modern and cosmopolitanly chaotic. Roy and I were put down at a bridge table with an Italian and a Maltese lady, and our only common language was French, which all of us mispronounced in different ways. I ended by calling "carreau" instead of "cœur", and to the delight of the Italian and the Maltee, Roy and I went down 1400 points.

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Our last night in Aleppo we visited an elderly Jew who is reputed to be the richest man in the town. He received us in his dining-room and we seated ourselves round a vast table laden with sweetmeats, mostly flavoured with coconut. To wash the flavour away we drank John Haig's whisky almost neat in wine-glasses. Our host and his son and daughters wore the latest fashions of Europe, but his wife had not moved with the times. She was swathed in what I believe is called a wrapper, smoked a hubble-bubble incessantly, and spat whenever the spirit moved her.

But as they talked, we realized that people like them have lives far more interesting than we of the West. Under the Turks they, as despised Jews, had existed by the grace of this or that Pasha. Government spies told the Pasha when business was good, and our friends had to pay him large dividends on their profits. When the war came, the extortion became outrageous and our host had terrific adventures with his fortune, all of which he kept in golden sovereigns in boxes. The Turks, of course, knew of his hoard and determined to have it. First they were polite and offered to exchange his gold for depreciated paper. He replied that he had no gold, and proceeded to bury his boxes by night in the very Pasha's garden who led the attack. No one dreamed of looking for them there. But the Turks persisted, and eventually he was arrested; whereupon his wife, also by night, dug up the boxes and herself led a camel caravan down to Beirut, laden with her gold and corn for the troops. The old lady, when this was told, preened herself with delight and spat copiously and blew clouds of thick smoke through her nose. In Beirut they again buried the money in a Moslem garden, unbeknown, of course, to the proprietor; but eventually the

pursuit became so hot that they decided that by hook or by crook they must get the money out of the country. This was before Italy had entered the war, and Italian ships still called at Beirut. The vessels were, of course, strictly searched for stowaways and illegally exported gold, but once again the old lady beat the Turkish authorities. Little by little the gold was smuggled out of the country in kegs of butter which did not come under the heading of exports, because she took care each time to sell them to the chief steward of the ship, who was also in the game, as rations for his passengers.



THE ROMAN ROAD TO ANTIOCH



THE EUPHRATES
TWO STONE-LADEN BARGES PULLED BY TEAMS OF EUPHRATES BARGEES

CHAPTER XVII

TO THE EUPHRATES

WE had a full-dress departure from our Aleppo guest-house. Every Armenian urchin in the quarter tried to commit suicide under our wheels as Roy backed the lorry down the narrow lane, every adult impeded our packing with endless questioning, and Monsieur stood in his doorway looking like Mr. Turveydrop—a picture of elegant and affectionate deportment. But at last we were away, and a quarter of an hour later we bade farewell to the citadel, standing gaunt and weird in the middle of the town.

Our road led to the Euphrates and Deir es Zor, and with the going excellent—another military highway—the Aleppo plain soon dropped behind a low range of hills and we were out in sweeping highlands, intensively cultivated in multi-coloured strips and diamonds. And so into the desert proper. But the desert we saw was blooming like the rose. In another month it would be brown and sunbaked, but now, after the winter rains, there stretched before us into a sharp horizon a carpet of almost transparent green, spattered everywhere with wild flowers—cyclamen, poppies, anemones, and squills. And everywhere there were enormous herds of goats and sheep—and when I say enormous, I mean it; for they averaged seven and eight hundred in a herd.

After sixty miles the good going ended and we were abruptly launched into wide broken red country, which in its turn yielded to limestone hills which rose in white and green patches ahead of us like the chalk Downs of Sussex. And vegetation became more sparse, and life more rare. But we did meet two men, bearded Arabs, leading their horses and looking very much the worse for wear. They asked for water, and in a rather slapdash way we poured directly out of our water-drums into two mugs, spilling at least a pint in the process. The Arabs watched us coldly, and when they had drunk their fill, they pointedly poured the few drops

remaining in their mugs back into the drums, as much as to say, "Well, if you don't know the value of water in the desert, perhaps this will teach you." Both of us felt rather small.

It is a great thrill to see for the first time one of the remoter great waterways of the world. I know the Shari and the Niger. I want to sail the waters of the Volga and the Amazon. Now I saw the Euphrates. It looked grand. Below us across a drab plain the river wound its way south in sweeping bends. We at once decided to lunch on its banks. But our meal was very disturbed. Just as we were starting, two stone-laden barges pulled by teams of Euphrates bargees nosed their way round the bend ahead of us. They were making their way up-stream to Jerablus, and it was hard work. Two long ropes were hitched to the mast of each barge, and each rope was manned by four men. Each man wore round his waist a heavy leather belt to which was tied a short rope, and this in its turn was hitched on to the main hawser. As they walked, they sang, and the beat of the music gave rhythm to their stride; and, straining on the belts like horses working well up to the collar, they toiled past us, their bodies raked like the funnels of some old-fashioned luxury yacht. The next excitement was the arrival of a huge flock of sheep on their way back to the highland pastures after the mid-day watering in the river. They were shepherded by two men mounted on donkeys, one in front, the other behind. Neither shepherd paid us the slightest heed, but the sheep were less exclusive. They swarmed all round us, nosed us and let us scratch their heads. Then the shepherd gave a shrill call and down went every head and away they streamed, head to tail, leaving us drenched in a sticky aroma, half of oil, half of sweat. Then arrived a tall, good-looking Arab, who told us that we had disregarded his hail for a lift some three miles back. So, to make amends, I gave him a cigarette, which he took, and invited him to share our apricots and coffee. He refused point blank. Why, I don't know. But he was quite game to help us wash up, which we did in the swirling brown waters of the Euphrates itself. Rather fun.

Our afternoon stage to Rakka, where we would rejoin the Euphrates, brought us quickly out of the stifling river bed back into the highlands; and once more a desert carpeted with flowers unfolded itself as far as the eye could see. We had, of course, a passenger—a very woolly Arab who rather nicely, before he stepped on board, told us that he had no





THE NORTHERN SYRIAN DESERT THE CAMEL NURSES

money and that he wouldn't bother us unless we could carry him for nothing. He was from Aleppo, where he had been marketing camels, and was making his way back to Rakka to his tribe, which lived by camel-breeding. At once he began to talk camels. This part of the desert was, he told us, famed far and wide from Aleppo to Baghdad as the best maternity hospital for expectant camel-mothers. For camels apparently are quite as particular in such matters as are the fashionable matrons of Mayfair. Anyhow, all the great camel-breeding tribes of the Euphrates have immemorial grazing rights in the zone, and it is a fact that a camel foal born from these parts fetches top prices in the markets.

The whole place was spattered with groups of very expectant mothers, and for fun I lay down on the grass and photographed them in silhouette against the sky. They looked like a Wedgwood Frieze. There were, of course, any number of camelmen looking after such valuable stock, and soon we had a batch round us who were delighted to be photographed, first with Roy and then with me; and one very jolly thing about them was that they knew before we told them that we were English. In this respect the desert Arab is a pleasant contrast to his Egyptian brother. For the first instinct of the Egyptian Bedouin of the Delta when they see a white man who talks English, which most of them recognize, is to assume that the stranger is American. The desert Arab of Syria has hardly heard of America.

By this time the sun was sinking, and, leaving the camel nursing-homes, we pushed on as fast as we could with assurances from our friend in the rumble that it was only two hours to Rakka. But before we got there, twice he made us stop. The first occasion was very bewildering. We were passing a group of camels, when the Arab in charge started to wave and shout. When we stopped, our friend got out, and there in the middle of the desert the two solemnly swapped cloaks. I asked our man [who got decidedly the best of the bargain], what it all meant. He nodded his head, stroked his nose with his forefinger, and smiled. But he told me nothing, and what his forefinger meant I have no idea. Twenty miles on he left us. We asked him where he was going, and he pointed to a distant slope where we could just make out a bunch of brown Bedouin tents. "My tribe is there," he said. "Good-bye, and thank you." And he walked away into the desert with long swinging strides.

It was almost dusk when we saw the Euphrates again,

but our track to the river bank was not only wickedly rough, but, in so far as direction was concerned, simply played the fool and ran about like mercury on a plate; and when we eventually reached the ferry for Bakka, where we were to spend the night, we had covered ten speedometer miles, which, as the crow flies, would, I am sure, only have been four. And then I might have been back in Africa. Rakka village lay across the river, and our transport was just one of those "Heath Robinson" ferries of which I had sampled so many in Equatoria; and the ferrymen sang as others had sung on the Congo; and there was the same agony of suspense that the plank gangways would be rotten; and the same sunset calm brooded over the river as I had known and loved on the Shari near Lake Chad three years before. Birds were fighting and skimming the surface of the water, women were filling water pots on the brink and chattering like magpies, and above the long sandy bank the village was a mud village with a mud smell, and tiny spirals of blue smoke were showing faintly above every hovel against the pale evening sky. It was lovely.

Rakka is an air headquarters of French aviation in the area, and, thanks to the kindness of the French Delegate in Aleppo, warning had been sent ahead of our arrival, and that night we were honoured guests in an excellent mess. We dined well, and conversation was brisk and by no means tame. It was the usual topic—French *versus* British administration in the Near East. Our French hosts were frankly outspoken. "We here in Syria," they said, "neither understand nor like your methods in Palestine or Iraq. You seem to allow the natives to do whatever they like, and, of course, that makes everything far more difficult for us here. Don't your officials often feel humiliated by your endless policy of surrender? Of course you pay them well—far too well. Do you know that your scales of pay are almost twice as high as ours? And that doesn't help us either. When an Arab comes into Syria from Palestine, where he has seen all your people flinging their money about like sand, he doesn't think much of us in Damascus where not one of us has got a sou to spare."

I went to bed that night feeling that perhaps I had really got to the root of a problem which had puzzled me for years.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TURKISH FRONTIER

NEXT morning all our plans to continue our journey into Iraq by way of Deir es Zor, went by the board. A French officer had arrived late the night before, and he told us at breakfast that the road along the Euphrates was simply frightful, and that gave the cue to another of our hosts. "Well," he said, "if you want a good road, the way to go is, of course, north to the Turkish railway at Tel Abiad and then due east across the desert to Ras el Ain. There are two tracks, one alongside the railway and the other fifteen miles south of it. Don't take the railway one, for it is spring-time now and the tribes are moving, and in the spring Turkish bandits from the other side of the railway are always coming across the frontier to see what they can get. The other day two Syrians crawled into Tel Abiad dressed in newspapers. Their car from Ras el Ain had been attacked by a Turkish party who took every single thing they possessed and then set the car on fire. But the other track ought to be quite safe; anyhow, it would be interesting; and you English like adventure." His last comment decided us. We were being challenged. So we got out our maps and worked our distances and direction as well as we could. Not that that meant much; for our wretched map had not more than one recognizable feature to every hundred square miles.

However, before we could decide anything definitely, we had to have permission from the French Commandant of the post, as, of course, he was generally responsible for our safety. He grinned. "Good luck to you, and here is a letter of introduction to our fellow at Tel Abiad; and, by the way, as you are going there, I wonder would you take one of our men with you and hand him over to our commander?" I said that we should be delighted; but I felt less delighted when he straightway summoned a sergeant and told him to get Yusuf out of the guardroom and have him and his kit ready

in a quarter of an hour. I must have looked rather blank as he hastened to explain. Yusuf had been on leave from Tel Abiad, which was his station, and the night before had got very drunk in the canteen and had hit a French N.C.O. on the head, and as punishment was being returned to duty.

So when we left we were, in fact, a Black Maria—but a very cheery Black Maria; for Yusuf was delighted to be out of prison, and still more delighted that, instead of walking the sixty miles to Tel Abiad, he was having a lovely motor drive with a pair of fools who went so far as to give him a cigarette. Once beyond hail of Rakka, he told us that he had had a grand time the night before. The French N.C.O. had spilt his beer on purpose and he had knocked him clean out; but when he had been up in front of the commandant his story had been disbelieved and he had been sentenced for unprovoked assault. Judging by Yusuf's appearance, I am sure the Commandant's judgment was entirely just. Yusuf looked what he doubtless was: a real tough.

Twenty miles north of Rakka the track became wretched. It ran parallel with the river Balih, which had been periodically dammed up for primitive irrigation, and we had to negotiate a series of water runnels cut clean across the road. Our progress was like a steeplechase. But there was plenty of interest, for the tribes were moving, and we passed at least six large groups—men, women, children, donkeys, sheep, and goats—all making for the south. They were pleasant forthcoming folk, far different from the wild men of the Alouite mountains. But we did not tarry for much talk—time was precious; for after Tel Abiad we had ahead of us another eighty unknown miles to Ras el Ain, and, like Mabel, both of us disliked the idea of going home in the dark—especially with Turks about. Just short of Tel Abiad we passed *Ain Arus* (The Bride's Fountain), where local tradition says that Sarah is buried. I remarked to Yusuf that Sarah was really buried in Hebron in Palestine, but he shook his head vehemently. "Impossible," he said; "she's here. Did not my grandfather tell my father and his father tell him? They knew"

And then Tel Abiad itself. The name means "the white hill", and Tel Abiad was quite unmistakable. On the top of a small limestone pimple standing alone in a flat plain was the French fort and above it the *tricolore* beyond it to the north was the embankment of the Kaiser's Baghdad railway, which never reached Baghdad and which is the geographical frontier

THE BERLIN TO BAGHDAD RAILWAY





THE TENTS OF KEDAR

between Syria and Anatolia ; and beyond it again the Turkish fort, and above it the Crescent and Star. As a frontier, the railway may be strategically ridiculous ; but, anyhow, you can see it, and you do know where you are.

We drove directly to the fort, where Yusuf was greeted with loud laughter by his messmates ; but, to our annoyance, the French officer of the post was out shooting, and no one else would do anything without him, though all were unanimous that we would never get to Ras el Ain that night without a guide. So all we could do was to wait in impatience. When the commandant did return, he was almost theatrically beautiful. He wore a French Staff cap, a very tight and very long sky-blue tunic, riding-breeches piped with red, and over the lot a superb blue cloak reaching down to his heels. After reading our letter of introduction, he insisted on our remaining for lunch, and over it he confessed anxiety regarding our plans. Once more we heard the depressing story of the newspaper-garbed Syrians, and in the end both of us felt almost guilty to be the cause of so much reasonable and irritating anxiety to the guardians of the law in lawless parts. Not that the officer, poor man, was obstructive. Only he was taking no risks. In the end, after much discussion, he detailed three Syrian soldiers to go with us as escort, and gave us a pair of carrier pigeons, one of which we were to launch at half past four to report progress, while the other was to be kept either to announce our safe arrival at Ras el Ain or to ask for help wherever we might be stranded.

By the time all this had been settled and our party mobilized, we had lost two valuable hours of daylight. However, our escort told us that they knew the track intimately, and off we went more or less confidently. Half an hour later, we were completely disillusioned. Each of our escorts gave simultaneous and contradictory instructions which ended in our facing due west, and when we protested, they finally confessed that they had not the slightest idea where we were. So we took matters into our own hands, switched again into the south across miles of soft bumpy ground which reduced our speed to not more than eight miles an hour, and then suddenly all was well. We struck a track ; it ran due east ; and we had really good going for another half-hour. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and once again we were ploughing across open country, and once again we were lost. This time our hearties in the rumble volunteered the useful suggestion that it would be wise to ask someone the way.

We both burst out laughing. It was just as if the bo'sun in a boat shipwrecked in mid-Atlantic without wireless were to suggest that the captain should hail a passing ship.

So once again we took matters into our own hands, turned the car so that the sun, which was by then well down in the west, was behind our tailboard, and hoped for "someone". And at last, to our great relief—and still more the relief of the hearties—we spotted a solitary Bedouin tent on a very distant slope, and when we were within hail four very woolly Bedouin came out to investigate the noise. This gave the hearties another opportunity to make fools of themselves. They pushed back their safety catches, jumped out of the lorry and, with their rifles at the carry, advanced in open order towards the tent. This was not at all the sort of party either of us liked ; so I jumped out after them, roared at them to shoulder arms, and advanced myself to parley. There had been absolutely no need for any warlike preparation. The four Arabs were delighted to see new faces, and, when they learned our dilemma, loosed torrents of directions at us, which the hearties, of course, said they followed perfectly. But we were taking no more risks. So I asked the four if one of them would come with us as guide—and all volunteered at once. None of them had ever been in a car in his life. I selected the man I understood best, and with wide grins he climbed on board ; but, once we were off, he rather shook me. "You must drive as quick as you can," he said, "for by night there are bad people in the desert " And he looked anxiously into the north towards the frontier.

We did our best, but it was not a very good best. The going was soft and undulating, and the guide's instructions were most bewildering. He would give us a landmark far ahead, but when it disappeared as we drove into a hollow, he would suddenly switch direction, and when the first landmark reappeared we would be on a totally different line. But there was reason in his tactics. We were zigzagging to mislead possible danger. And suddenly he spotted trouble. We had emerged on to a wide undulating plain, and with a hoarse cry he ordered an abrupt swing north towards the railway. Two miles away to the south four well-mounted horsemen had halted facing us, and when we turned from them they broke into a gallop after us. "Turks !" shouted the guide ; and that was enough for us. The going was happily tolerable, and in five minutes we were hidden in a fold in the ground ; then there was another sharp change of direction, and when we

reached the next skyline, the horsemen were far in the rear and all was well.

After that life became monotonously depressing. We were in miles and miles of grey drift grass which looked and actually smelt stale ; and there was no relief, and we seemed to be going nowhere. But our guide was a born leader. "There will be a track," he said. "And ahead the country is better. Fear nothing. I am your guide." And eventually things did become more pleasant. The drift grass yielded at last to vast grazing grounds, and there were herds everywhere—sheep, goats, and camels—making their way to Bedouin encampments among the hills to the south. Suddenly the guide shouted that he identified one hill by name and that we were well on our way. So we stopped ; and while Roy filled up with petrol and water and the hearties talked to some camelmen who came up to have a look, I wrote a lovely message to our beautiful friend at Tel Abiad, and then, with great ceremony, we strapped it on to the pigeon's leg and launched it, and after two wide turns the bird towered, turned again, and was off like an arrow into the west.

But during the next hour tension became more and more evident in the rumble. The sun was sinking fast, the expected track obstinately refused to appear, and whenever I looked behind me it was to see four faces set and scanning the country ahead with anxious and puzzled eyes. But to offset the tension there was for us the fun of wild life. We flushed four large herds of gazelle, and away they went bobbing up the hillside, to halt on the crestline against the sky to see the line we were taking so that they could disappear in the opposite direction. There were wise-looking storks, slow on the foot, but magnificently strong on the wing ; and buzzards and grey herons and vultures ; and great droves of starlings twisting and turning above us with a wild whirr of wings. But most interesting of all were the sand-grouse. They were settling in for the night closely packed in sheltered ground like rabbits sitting outside their warrens in the afterglow ; and when we approached, up they would rise like a gust of wind, their wings beating like flails, and then they would flatten out like aeroplanes to cruise over the next hill to less disturbed quarters. But ever our shadow ran longer before us, and our guide's instructions became more and more tense and clipped, as we cast this way and that for the track. Then suddenly, when not more than ten minutes of daylight remained, there was a sudden gasp of relief and there was the track.

Then Nature started to attack us. Out of the sunset there rose a huge storm-cloud, black as ink and in relentless pursuit ; and we had only just time to get our side curtains down before it burst on our roof with a deafening crash. Even so we were drenched. A sixty-mile-an-hour wind swept the streaming rain through the canvas, the hail absolutely blotted out all landscape, and in five minutes our track was a river. But that helped us. We turned on our head-lights and the water showed up white and clear so that we couldn't lose our way ; and that way led to Ras el Ain. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped and we could see the storm thundering ahead of us ; but, to our disgust, it began a wide sweep and half an hour later again burst on us with all its old fury, so thick that, lights or no lights, we had to stop. When it passed—this time for good—water lay everywhere in pools, and never on any journey have I had worse skids. The French word for "skid" is far better than ours—"patiner", to skate—and that is exactly what we did. It was vile, and we drove on miserably. At every slight turn in the track, slide, swish, skid, and we had to pull up almost dead before we could get straight on our line again ; and all in pitch darkness with our clothes dripping and our hands numb with cold. And then, at last, a solitary light ahead : Ras el Ain ; and in my relief I clapped my frozen hands loudly. But our guide quickly damped my ardour. "Go slow," he said ; "there will be a little water".

The "little water" proved to be a good-sized river roaring like a torrent ; and between us and what the guide said was the ford there was a steep ramp set at an angle of fifteen degrees towards the river, with a sharp turn half-way down. We stopped to reconnoitre ; but the rain had turned the ramp into a perfect butterslide, and both of us did colossal skids on our own and got covered with mud. However, we had to get across. So I mobilized the hearties and the guide to push all their weight on the river side of the lorry, and Roy drove superbly. He could not use his brakes for fear of fatal skidding ; the six of us lay literally obliquely against the body to prevent the skid from becoming an uncontrollable broad-side slide ; and somehow we slithered down to the water's brink. All this takes far longer to describe than it did to happen ; and almost before I knew it Roy was wrenching the wheels left to plunge into the river. Two of the hearties had just time to jump on board, and with a terrific splash the poor lorry dived into the stream. But she kept going. She

plunged, she rolled, she shook, and once her tail lamp disappeared entirely and I thought she was certain to careen—but above the noise of the wind and the river I could still hear the roar of the engine, and suddenly, with a heave like a hippopotamus leaving a swamp, she lifted herself up out of the water and clambered on to the further bank.

Now it was my turn, with the guide and the remaining hearty, and we pulled up our clothes as high as we could and plunged into the stream. The water was ice cold and up to our thighs; but once across there was exercise and to spare to get our circulation racing again. The further bank was yet another butterslide, and nothing would coax the lorry to climb it. We tried rabbit wire, sacks, blankets, and wooden planks; we pushed and pulled; we cursed and swore—but all in vain; and at last we decided that I must go to Ras el Ain for help. "It is only a little way," said the hearty who accompanied me: but it was actually over two miles—slithery miles—in pitch darkness with my trousers clamped icily to my legs and my feet clumbered with mud and more mud. And then bathos. The French officer at the fort was away; the French civil commissioner at headquarters was away; nobody cared; my teeth were chattering and I was dead tired. So finally, with the hearty, I went into a café to drown my sorrows in a triple rum.

From that moment things began to go better. First arrived a corporal of police, then a sergeant, and then an interpreter, and after more triple rums all round the lot of us went up to the fort, where a charming Syrian officer, a Turk by nationality, who had fought against us in the Dardanelles, Mesopotamia and Palestine, received me with great relief, as he had been expecting us all the afternoon and was just about to wireless for search parties to go to our rescue. Thank goodness I was just in time to forestall action. He was at once most helpful, and produced a car and put six lusty soldiers into it, and off we all went to salvage Roy, with a promise of beds and dinner for us on our return. We reached the river in ten minutes, and in another ten the reinforcements had pushed the lorry up the ramp and we were bowling back to shelter in great spirits; an hour later a grand fire and an excellent dinner had made us forget everything. It was a perfect ending to a hectic but nevertheless a perfect day.

CHAPTER XIX

MOSUL AND THE MINORITIES

THE day we left Ras el Ain was the spring equinox, and once out of the shelter of the town we met the full blast of a lashing wind from the north-east which bit us to the bone. And the desert, though green, was empty, and, except for the endless black ribbon of the railway and an occasional Bedouin tent, it was practically featureless—just a slow switchbacking landscape across which our track drifted monotonously save when we had to negotiate three fords in succession across rivers in really dangerous spate. Gradually, however, the prairie yielded place to richer cultivated ground, and there were more villages and fewer tents and an atmosphere of more established law. Twice we saw huge Turkish flocks of sheep being hurriedly driven across the embankment of the railway into the Turkish territory, the shepherds presumably thinking that we were a French motor patrol out for trespassers. Then suddenly we heard the distant whistling of a train, and over the next rise saw Nisibin, the terminus of the Baghdad railway, standing on a squat hill; and facing it, on the other side of a dreary marsh, the new French post of Kamechlie where our passports would be visa'd and the car cleared by Customs for Iraq.

To me it was a thrill to see Nisibin. During the war the name had haunted me. For every intelligence report from the Near East seemed to mention it—so many men, so many guns, so many aeroplanes on their way to fight us, first at Kut and later at Baghdad. Kamechlie also stands on a hill, and the wind there was piercingly cold. But happily our stay was short. The French staff were charming, the formalities were completed most expeditiously, and after half an hour we were off again into the east, but this time with a shade of south in it, to carry us into Iraq.

Our road lay through flat, shelterless country rimmed to the north by a long chain of Turkish mountains, off which

the wind blew with Arctic chill ; but the track, though flanked with telegraph wires, was so bad that we soon felt sure we must be on the wrong road. We sought information from everyone we met—that is, about one person in every twenty miles—but not one could or would understand my Arabic. It was consistently, "*Ma'arif*" ("I do not know"), until we reached a jolly village clustered on a tiny mud hill, at the base of which, by a slimy, fetid pond, an old man with a high bonnety tarbush round which he had wound what looked like several yards of uncooked sausages, was sitting studying life in the folds of his clothing. He knew—old men always know ; and from him we learned that we were not only on the right track, but only a few miles from the last French post, where, as though to confirm his information, we met the Iraq railway convoy on its way north from Mosul to catch the Anatolian express at Nisibin for Stambul and Europe. One of the chauffeurs, however, gave us unwelcome news. We were still nearly a hundred miles from Mosul, and as we bumped uncomfortably over the five miles of neglected no man's land between the frontier posts of the two States, we wondered grimly where we were likely to sleep that night.

Our entry into Iraq was somewhat uncomfortable. We crossed a well-built bridge to find waiting on the further side a police car carrying four men who, though they were civil, contrived to convey in their attitude that they were more interested in our movements than seemed natural. This impression became stronger over the next twenty miles until we reached the first Iraq police station. All the way the police car sat almost aggressively on our tail, and even when we signalled it on, and later when we actually stopped to let it pass, it seemed anxious only to dog our course. It followed us into the compound, and there we became more bewildered than ever. All was suddenly smiles, and, far from anyone suggesting anything against us, everyone wanted to know what they could do for us. Mosul, they said, was far away, and it was late. Was their Bir Uglat Post good enough for our honours ? Would we like to see ? And then more smiles as they conducted us in a procession into an excellent rest-house where three policemen were hard at work brushing and sweeping and arranging two large rooms for our accommodation.

We accepted gratefully, and later, after supper, which our hosts had reinforced from their own mess with a fine dish of stewed vegetables, the police sergeant, the Customs clerk, and the passport clerk paid us an official call to enquire after our

health. At first they were terribly polite and formal, but later their shyness disappeared and they told us that, though we had not known it, their close attention to us when we were driving from the bridge to the Post, was to give us security. They had spent their day after sheep-raiders from Syria, and had recaptured a stolen flock. But the marauders had escaped, and you never can tell in these parts. Robbers were very cunning and they were probably still in the offing when we arrived, and if we had been alone and unescorted they might very easily have decided to make up for the loss of the sheep by getting what they could from us. We were wisely silent about our unfounded fears, and thanked them profusely.

It was a jolly end to a good day, but a prelude to a bad night. The window of my room was broken, and we had had succulent sausages for supper, and the Post boasted three pi-dogs and four cats with sensitive noses and empty stomachs. Twice the lot invaded my privacy, and at last in a fury I had to get out in the bitter cold and put our table broadside against the broken pane. Even then the thwarted raiders had the best of it. They settled down outside my door and the cats loved and yowled, and the pi-dogs barked at the stars, and I fell over the water-jug when I tried to find the matches to light our stove to restore warmth to my frozen limbs. Iraq started very badly.

Next afternoon we reached Mosul. Our stage from Bir Uglat had only been sixty miles, so we had driven slowly over tolerable roads, had lunched in the middle of a herd of camels, and at three o'clock from the top of a soft range of green-clad hills had seen the Tigris winding its way southwards, and Mosul itself—a vast heap of grey and white buildings on a low hill—standing out firm and clear against the distant snowclad mountains of Kurdistan to the east. Chance gave us an interesting arrival. It was *Nauruz*—New Year's Day in the traditional calendar of the Middle East—and all Mosul was out to "*shem el nessim*" (sniff the breezes). The sun shone and the air was clean and bracing and everybody was enjoying himself. Our road lay outside and parallel with the grey walls of the town. It was crowded—pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, Arabs with flapping legs sitting on the sterns of donkeys, camels bedizened with fine red tassels and coloured ropes and saucy little plumes perched between their ears; and on both sides of the road carpet-loads of picnicking families, all sitting together in little clumps. Everyone was wearing a vivid Sunday best; most people had bunches of flowers in



MOSUL

THE TIGRIS WINDING ITS WAY SOUTHWARD AND MOSUL ITSELF A VAST HEAP OF GREY AND WHITE BUILDINGS



MOSUL THE ARAB MARKET

their hands ; and moving through the crowds was an army of lemonade-sellers, nut-sellers, cake-sellers and sweet-sellers, each trade with its peculiar identifying call.

No one paid the slightest attention to us, and progress was very slow until we turned through the walls and entered the town itself, which was comparatively deserted. Ahead of us stretched the huge main street which the Turks completed just before the war ended. It is a really notable thoroughfare, carved straight through what was a rambling Oriental town, and, somehow, despite its modernity, it is in keeping with the spirit of the place and even adds to its beauty. Far away at its further end we could see beyond the Tigris the great grass-grown mounds which are the ruins of Nineveh, and beyond again ridge after ridge of ever higher hills ending in the snow-capped ranges of Kurdistan.

Like Tobias in the book of Tobit, I was delighted to arrive in Mosul ; but when I suggested to Roy that, if I was a modern Tobias, he, as my guide and philosopher and friend, was a twentieth-century Archangel Raphael, he wisely told me to stop my romancing and to keep my eyes open for Ford's agency.

To-day Mosul has special political importance as the centre of those old Christian minorities which have survived in Middle East Islam, and whose welfare for centuries has been a matter of deep consideration among the great Christian Powers of the West. All the time we were in Mosul everyone talked to us of the problem of these minorities—there are no less than nine different Christian sects centralized in the town—and of their fate when Iraq entered the League of Nations.

There is, and probably always will be, tension between Moslem and Christian in this part of the world. The Moslems do not like the Christians, and the Christians not only do not like the Moslems, but in the past they have suffered so much at the hands of Islam that they both distrust and fear it. Of these Christian sects by far the largest is the Assyrian community. Under the Turks the Assyrians in particular enjoyed certain local privileges such as religious jurisdiction over certain classes of civil offences, and, although the Turks treated them disgracefully, they had a certain degree of independence on sufferance, and on the outbreak of war organized a spirited revolt on behalf of the Allied cause against the Turks. The result was tragic. It was suppressed by Turkish armed forces with all the horrors of Turkish barbarity, and only a small percentage of the community escaped as refugees to safety behind the British lines.

When the war was over they and the other Christian communities counted hopefully on a Christian Government in Northern Iraq under which they could live in peace ; but the mandate system made it inevitable that the new State of Iraq should be an indivisible whole, and that, as the great majority of the population was Arab, the New Government of Iraq should be preponderantly Arab. The Assyrian disillusion was therefore complete, and up to 1928 they not only flatly refused to accept Iraqi nationality, but declined all overtures towards a compromise and determined to recross the frontier into Turkey and to resume occupation of the land which, before the war, they had tilled and owned. But they reckoned without the Turks. Mustafa Kemal not only flatly refused to have them back, but complained officially to Iraq that he viewed the continued presence of so many Assyrians and other Christian communities on the Iraq-Turkish frontier as an unfriendly act and requested their re-settlement in other and more remote parts of the valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Notwithstanding this, the Assyrians believed that the Turks would take them back if they presented themselves for admission ; and in 1928 some two hundred families who had formerly lived in Anatolia, started off into the north to cross the frontier. The Turks met them with a battalion of infantry and machine-guns, and flatly refused them admission.

That, anyhow, cleared the air and left no alternative save Iraqi nationality ; and to-day they are under the Government of Baghdad with the guarantee of the League of Nations, now that Iraq is independent, that they will not be molested on account of their religion. As a guarantee it is unhappily vague and unsatisfactory, and naturally their open refusal in the past to become Iraqi subjects has not endeared them with the Arab powers that be. They have, in fact, fallen between two stools. At the same time these Christian communities are very difficult problems for the Arab administration. Their instinct—which is sometimes, but not always, correct—is to interpret every official Arab action affecting an individual Christian official in the administration as biased and due to religious prejudice.

Up to date, however, British influence in Iraqi counsels has secured them from any great injustice , but no amount of Iraqi impartiality or British influence can save the Assyrians from the geographical handicap of the situation of the bulk of their villages along the Turkish frontier. The zone where

they live is a perfect happy-hunting ground for bandits, a tangle of tall mountains and deep forests, of caves and ravines and of tearing rivers, all of which combined make military communications almost impossible and the idea of massed reprisals against the bandits quite out of the question. Lately the Iraqi police forces have been trebled in strength along the frontier, but in such a country not even an army corp of as calibre much higher than the Iraqi army could stamp out the evil of banditry. Banditry, in fact, is still, as it has always been, the sport of the area ; and though on the Iraqi side there is law—*pax Britannica*—on the Turkish side there is next to no effective government and the bandits can do what they like.

Their tactics are simple. A party lies up in a cave on the Turkish side of the border waiting for the approach of an Assyrian flock of sheep, and when it is conveniently near they rush across, kill the Assyrian shepherds, drive back the sheep and hide them in caves or in forests in Turkish territory. The Assyrians naturally protest, and the Iraqi Government takes up their protest with Turkey. But, though Angora may be modernized, Turkish administration in these out-of-the-way frontier posts is still *ancien régime*. The officials are wretchedly paid, and now, as in olden days, never miss an opportunity to increase their salaries ; and banditry is an extremely lucrative source of unearned income. So this is what happens after a raid such as I have described. The bandits have captured five hundred sheep. They give fifty to the local Governor, fifty to the local Army commander, fifty to be divided among the local garrison, and with rare guile deposit a hundred more with the Customs authorities. Thus when Angora receives the official protest from Baghdad the reply is pat : "There have been no raids from our Turkish side, but about the day you mention one hundred sheep from the Iraqi side were found straying in Turkish territory and they have been impounded by the Customs." Iraq replies : "Then send back the hundred sheep." Turkey replies : "They have been sold to defray expenses of maintenance." This is an utter lie ; for, of course, such of the sheep as have not been eaten have been sold for the benefit of Customs officials. But nothing can be proved.

There had been several incidents of this nature, each of which had exasperated the Assyrians more and more, and just before we reached Mosul they had taken matters into their own hands. The old rule in those parts of the world is

raid and counter-raid. So the Assyrians organized a strong cutting-out party on their own, crossed the border into Turkey, killed a few Turks and rounded up far more sheep than they had lost. The Turkish sheep-owners understood such tactics. This was what they were used to, and at once common sense asserted itself. They made private overtures to the Assyrian farmers, and the result was an altogether admirable agreement—unofficial, of course: "The people we are both out against are the bandits, who kill you and provoke you to kill us. Both of us want to feed our flocks in peace, and the only way to achieve this is to kill every bandit on sight. Let us have done with governments and red tape and deal only with hard facts."

But inevitably this latest development lowered still further whatever opinion the Assyrians ever had of the Iraq Government and increased their constant fears as to their fate at the hands of a purely Arab administration in Baghdad now that Iraq has entered the League of Nations.

CHAPTER XX

TO BAGHDAD

MOSUL is a fine town, and it has always been important in history. Its name is embodied in "muslin"—*Moussoullaine*, Mosul wool being for centuries a much-sought-after product for the looms of France. In Moslem traditions too it has a peculiar place. For when Mohamed mounted his mythical winged horse, Burak, and flew from Medina to Jerusalem, he made a wide detour on his way back to Arabia which brought him over Mosul. None of its inhabitants noticed his passage; but one of the minarets of the town mosque was more observant. It heard the whirr of those magic wings and, realizing that the Prophet was honouring the town, bowed low in pious obeisance. And thus Mosul now boasts of its famous leaning minaret.

Again my prototype Tobias on his extraordinary journey from the land of Zebulun to Raghes in Persia fought with the monster fish in the Tigris just below the town, and with its entrails not only exorcized the evil spirit possessing the bride which he found in Ecbatana, but also cured his father Tobit's blindness.

Nineveh, however, was beyond us, and left only a vague memory of shapeless mounds which may or may not have hidden palaces and temples and gates; but our expedition to see it and Jonah's tomb brought us across the Tigris and the oddest bridge in the East. It is a perfect "Folly" and a very wicked "Folly". For the first fifty yards from the Mosul bank our road lay over a swaying pontoon, and it was only half-way across the river that the bridge proper began. From there and to the eastern bank it was a fine solid construction of good roadway and handsome arches. The story of this odd construction is very unflattering to the Turks. A pre-war Turkish Governor happened to get into financial straits and, finding that speculation on small lines would not save

him, decided to do things on a grand scale. Mustering the inhabitants of the town, he made them all sign a memorial asking for a bridge, and when this formidable document was forwarded to Constantinople it had the good fortune not to be thrown into the waste-paper basket; and in due course the lucky Governor was told to prepare plans and estimates for the construction. His largest creditor was a contractor, and from then on all was plain sailing. The two went into partnership, pocketed one-third of the grant from Constantinople and lodged it in France, and with the remainder built two-thirds of a bridge. They then, according to Mosul gossip, retired to Paris and lived happily ever afterwards. Of course, the Turks never completed the bridge, and up to the time of our visit the Iraq Government had lacked funds for the undertaking.

The Mosque of Nebi Junis, where the Prophet Jonah is buried, amply made up for our disappointment about Nineveh. It stands on a pimple of a hill just short of the first foothills of Kurdistan. It was a steep climb up to the mosque, but once inside its cool walls everything was restful. Two old turbaned Arabs in a corner mumbled Koranic texts on their hunkers; children peeked at us curiously round the white-washed pillars; swallows chattered over their nest-building in the eaves above, and the old Imam of the place proceeded to tell us the story of Jonah, much as the Bible tells it. When he had finished he conducted us up a narrow winding stairway and from a grilled gallery we looked down on the tomb itself. It was covered in black draperies, and above it hung green and red pennons, richly emblazoned with the Prophet's name. "And the whale?" I asked the Imam. "Where is it?" His reply was surprisingly modern. "Who knows?" he said. "It may be an allegory? Anyhow, it is not here."

We spent three good days in Mosul, and the rest did us both good—especially Roy, who had had a really hard time since Aleppo; but on one account we were very glad to get on our road again. It was bitterly cold at night, and outside our rooms in the railway hostel a kennelful of puppies whined and yelped from sunset to dawn. They were as cold as we were. So we began to hanker for the heats of Baghdad, and on a fine gusty morning we set off with the prospect of a steady drop down the right bank of the Tigris, avoiding Kirkuk and the normal line of communication. It was not a good track, nor was it really interesting, and as we began to meet the greater

heat there was more and more dust and both we and the lorry reacted badly. But these early conditions were paradise compared with the absolute hell we struck during the last seventy miles before Baghdad.

We had lunched just north of Samarra, and after lunch made an expedition to inspect a ruined castle standing high above our road. It was an outpost of the Parthian Empire, the counterpart of the Roman ruins we had seen between Antioch and Aleppo, and from its height we would have had a brilliant view in every direction had it not been for the beginning of a dust-storm. Below us to the north a great plain was still streaked and patterned with our British trenches of fourteen years ago. It was just the sort of view which emphasizes the silliness of war. The place is vile, arid, and empty ; and we saw it wreathed in a fine drift of piercing dust. And yet for months our fellows had lived the lives of moles there, always with the prospect of staying there for ever if a stranger bullet found its billet. War is a hateful and useless thing.

An hour later the sandstorm was in full blast. It came sweeping out of the empty desert to the west, hitting the side-curtains of the lorry like lashing rain, and three times we had to stop in the middle of a cloud so thick that a London fog is a poor parallel. And this sand seemed far dustier than the sand of the Sahara, and was ten times more choking and penetrating. However, I decided that, discomfort or no, I must get a photograph. My first picture was taken in a lull ; the second in a terrific spasm. Just as I was about to take the picture, the sand hit my face like a sledgehammer, blew my dustglasses off my nose and hurled about an ounce of grit into both my eyes. But before they closed for good, I snapped the shutter, and then, weeping bitterly, groped my way back to the car. But when I got there, all I could find in my sightless condition to dry my tears, was a dirty dish-cloth smelling of sardines. For the next twenty minutes I was a complete casualty, and the tornado blew and blew, and by the time we judged from our speedometer that we were within striking distance of Baghdad, we both were sights for the gods—our faces sickly beige in colour, our hair white, and our clothes thickly veneered in brown-pink dust.

The first we knew of Baghdad was a field of cultivation into which we strayed by mistake ; then there were palm trees, seen mistily through the storm, then sign-posts and more sign-posts ; and at last a direction to Maude bridge, and we

had arrived. The Tigris looked wild and fearsome in the chocolate haze, the town on the east bank cowered flat under a leaden pall of whirling sand—Baghdad, in fact, showed itself at its worst to two travellers who both had been looking forward to their arrival with an almost sentimental feeling for the city of the Thousand and One Nights.

I cannot write of Baghdad with any enthusiasm. Compared with Cairo or Jedda or Jerusalem or Aleppo, it has no charm at all. It is a dead flat town—so flat and so dull that it seems ludicrous to think that Haroun el Rashid and his Golden Caliphs with all their pomp and pageantry could ever have chosen to live there. Gone are all traces of their glory—at least, in so far as a casual visitor can discover during a short stay. To those who live there Baghdad may betray itself as worthy of its reputation; but so far as we were concerned it had certainly hid its light under a bushel. The endless straggling town sprawls north and south alongside the river. It is a bewildering maze of narrow, characterless lanes and alleyways, and through this Oriental warren one single street worth calling a street has been hewn. It was designed and opened by the Turks; it has been repaved with asphalt since the war; but of all the streets I have ever known, for sheer discomfort and irritation let me commend you to 'New Street' in the town of Haroun el Rashid. And I would stake a great deal of money that so prosaic a title was the vindictive brainwave of a distracted British Director of Sewage, temporarily and unwillingly in charge of the Public Works Department during the height of a torrid summer.

Usually the street is a traffic block; always it is pandemonium. Taxis swerve and hoot all over the place; camels plod along, their heavy loads sweeping one's hat off as one cowers on the narrow pavement; *abanas* (cabs) totter slowly in the gutters; pedestrians scuttle and dodge; and policemen direct (?) the traffic. And the donkeys!!! They advance and retire unattended—a great tribute to their intelligence. Advancing, they carry a bag of mortar or sand balanced athwart their skinny backs. If it falls off they stand stock still in the middle of the road until somebody—anybody—replaces it. By that time the block of traffic up and down stream is yards and yards deep. Finally they turn sharply under the bonnet of a screaming lorry and patter happily into their destination and are unloaded.

Then comes the "return empty". The Arab who has done the unloading flings the empty sack across a waiting back,

gives the animal a resounding thwack on the stern, and off it charges full speed across the yard, through the gate and headlong and heedless into whatever traffic happens to be passing. I never saw a donkey killed, but once I saw a furious British matron meet an extremely impertinent Iraqi chauffeur head-on, when both were trying to miss a donkey, which only kicked up its heels and giggled. The empty sacks, of course, fall like leaves in Vallombrosa ; but the "returned empty" donkey does not stop for them. Someone will pick them up, and his duty is all speed for reloading. And so it goes on day in and day out. I would like to hear a London policeman say a few words after half an hour in Baghdad's New Street.

And the architecture which flanks this noble thoroughfare ! Here a villa fronted by a row of dusty palm trees ; next door a corrugated iron shed with a loose and flapping roof ; beyond that a hideous three-storied block divided into shops and offices and built on the principle that straight, unplastered walls are quite good enough for business purposes ; beyond that again a worm-eaten wooden building which, if isolated and on a mountain, might be mistaken for a shabby chalet, but which in Baghdad is merely ridiculous ; and beyond that again an open space "to be let" covered with garish advertisement hoardings, where it is not already cluttered with the remains of semi-demolished hovels, a haunt for lost dogs and a free site for all and every type of abuse. It is indeed difficult to speak temperately of Baghdad. Wherever one goes there is always New Street to be negotiated, and New Street would destroy the temper of a minor prophet.

But it would be unfair were I to imply that Baghdad had not some great moments for me. We went to tea with English friends who live in a charming flat overlooking the river in a surviving wing of a great semi-ruined building which six hundred years ago was the great university of Baghdad—the Mustansiriyeh. After tea our host took us over the ruins. They were quite wonderful, although to-day they are prosaically used as Customs stores. It is a brick building throughout, and we walked seeming miles through dim halls and along narrow corridors where in other days the sheikhs held their classes and students from far and wide sat at their feet. Now we might have been in the Catacombs, now in the crypt of St. Paul's, now in the Great Hall of Westminster. And for all that the place was a litter of twentieth-century merchandise awaiting clearance, all was redolent with mellow atmosphere—the atmosphere of six hundred years ago. Later we climbed

on to the wide flat roof and saw Baghdad from above. Here a minaret, there a group of dusty palm trees breaking the dead flatness of miles of flat roofs, and below us the river and beyond that the suggestion of the desert to the west. Quite a lovely view in the quiet of a dying day.

Our last evening we went out south into the country and walked along the river. It was hot, but there was a breeze off the water and life was moving. We passed an apology of a wharf where grain was being unloaded out of one of the curious circular Tigris coracle boats which river Arabs alone can steer. Further on we went through a little village full of snarling, inquisitive pi-dogs. But the little Arab children were quite charming and stood in solemn rows watching us with their fingers in their mouths. The last house was a café full of *fellahin* talking, joking, and spitting, and out once more in the cultivation we stood watching birds fighting low over the water. An old sheikh came up—inquisitively, of course—and asked us if we were tired and would like chairs brought under the shade of his palm trees. He was entirely patriarchal, and I felt that time had passed lightly over his head, and that he had somehow mastered the philosophy of age which teaches forgetfulness and peace. For near where we stood a battle had raged only fourteen years before, and on the other side of the river, standing stark against the evening sky, was the monument to our troops from Lancashire who forced the passage of the river in the face of the Turks and opened the way to the capture of Baghdad. We talked a little to the old man about the war, but he seemed indifferent, and he was far happier when his grandson, a tiny urchin of perhaps six years old, came up behind his chair and peeped at us round the old man's back. "He is the eldest son of my eldest son," he said; "he will live here after I am gone, and his sons after him."

CHAPTER XXI

IRAQI PROBLEMS AND PROGRESS

IRAQI politics were quite as difficult as I had expected they would be. But in a sense they are warming. For, whatever may be the feelings in London about our Mesopotamian adventures, local opinion in the States which border Iraq quite openly regard British policy in the Valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates not only with admiration but with a considerable amount of jealousy. I had met an old Arab in Beirut and his views had made me realize that perhaps, after all, we had not made such a frightful mess of things.

"You English," he had said, "have been terribly clever in Iraq, and your treaties are masterpieces, and you haven't done badly in Transjordan either. In ten years you have made kingdoms of a kind in each country, and both now enjoy what they think is democratic government. Of course it isn't, but they think it is, and into the bargain you have given them the illusion that their national aspirations as Arabs have been fulfilled. But your greatest *coup* is that you have gradually rid yourselves of all your most inconvenient and expensive responsibilities in Iraq, without sacrificing what of course we all know was your object in going to Baghdad originally. You wanted to keep Iraq open as a link in your air communications to India ; and you've done it. It cost you a great deal of money, but the dividends are coming in now, and, what is more, Iraq has now got to finance itself as best it can, without your taxpayers having to put their hands in their pockets. And now you are rounding everything off by getting the Iraqi into the League of Nations, and once he is there he can sit back and preen himself that he is every whit as good as his jealous neighbours in Persia and Turkey. You ought to hear the Egyptians and the Syrians and the Palestinian Arabs talking about Iraq. 'Mandates and military occupations,' they say, 'are insults. Why can't we be given a chance like Iraq ?

We are all far more intelligent than the Iraqi Arabs.' Oh, you English are no fools."

This new, independent Iraq has got an impressive façade on paper. The King governs constitutionally through his ministers, who in their turn are responsible to a Parliament, and this Parliament does function, for all that Iraq elections are just as blatantly "made" as are elections in Turkey and Persia and Egypt. Of course, there is inevitably any amount of nepotism and corruption in the Iraqi administration. But again exactly the same state of affairs exists and will continue always to exist in every Arab country. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to find that after an existence of only ten years there is an Iraqi administration which, though primitive, does function and does more or less control a country which, racially at any rate, has few of the elements of unity. Iraq is as interesting a political study as any in the Near East; and if Iraq fails it will be its own fault, for no child could have had a better start.

The more I talked politics in Baghdad, the more I was impressed by the fact that, although many were bewildered and even anxious, there was a jolly atmosphere of slightly haphazard optimism about the future. And the Iraqis themselves seemed to want to make good, which is a good start, and some of their aspirations and hopes were quite refreshingly sound. "Iraq does not want showy education," one man said to me. "Give the country primary schools with practical training; above them have secondary schools for those who are going into the professions, and make the tests stiff so that only the best do get into the law and medicine; and above that again have a university with a curriculum on lines suited to the needs of the country. We are terribly poor in brains and experience, with the result that the country has still to be run by a pre-war Turkish clique. Iraq itself has still to produce home-grown administrators competent for the highest posts, but if the powers that be keep their heads and do not indulge in flights of educational fancy, there is no reason why, in another ten years, the rising generation with purely Iraqi tradition behind them should not qualify to take the place of the Turkish educated men who now have to manage the country."

King Feisal is a most attractive figure. "Iraq," he told me, "is, as it were, a length of fine cloth ready to be cut to suit the country's measure; but it would be ruined by inexperienced scissoring. And that is what we have to prevent. Iraq

must and will do its own scissoring, and somehow we who have assumed the task of putting the country on its feet, must see to it that we train tailors fit for the job. Of course, we are poor and the country is undeveloped, and we owe most of what we have achieved to British advice and British money ; but we are not so hard up as we were, and, now that the oil is going to flow, money will at last be available for development. Our problem is to see that the money is spent properly and that the schemes which we undertake will give us a national dividend. We hope for the improvement of education, the improvement of communications, the improvement of public health, and above all the improvement of agriculture. For, although we are going to become an oil country, nothing will change the fact that Iraq's main industry is and always will be agriculture."

I attended one sitting of the Parliament and luckily struck a debate of real importance. The oil agreement with the Iraq Petroleum Company was up for ratification and there was a full attendance. The House itself lies north of Baghdad, not far from the King's Palace, and inside it is rather like a church with a gallery at one end for strangers and the Press. We looked down into a lofty chamber with seats ranged in parallel lines like pews, facing one another down both sides. Opposite the gallery at the further end was a sort of three-decker. The President of the Parliament sat alone on the topmost tier ; below him were two officials who, I believe, were Vice-Presidents ; and below them again were the Clerks of the House taking down the proceedings on the largest scribbling-blocks I have ever seen, with positive tree-trunks of pencils. And the pace at which those clerks wrote almost made me giddy. On the right of the three-decker, in a separate pew—which might have been the Squire's pew—sat the Cabinet, all wearing the Iraqi cap, which is rather like the pre-war forage cap of our British Army, only much taller. The rest of the members were distributed on either side of the central aisle, and all had in front of them writing-blocks and pencils. Most of them were dressed in European clothes ; but this drabness was relieved by a sprinkling of desert sheikhs with flowing robes and headdresses.

The proceedings were orderly but not dead. There were speeches which I could not understand, and questions and a certain amount of movement when one member rose from his seat and went over to another to discuss some point in whispers ; and, though at first sight I had thought that the

proceedings savoured rather of the monotony of a mere shareholders' meeting, in the end I came away with the pleasant reflection that this assembly had life and an individuality of its own. One figure, sitting alone on the left of the President's three-decker, intrigued me enormously. He was dressed all in black and sat alone like a brooding crow. I was told that he was the chief Parliamentary representative of the Christian minorities.

On the whole my Arab friends were reluctant to discuss the minorities, but in British quarters it was easy to see that there was anxiety. "Christians in the Mosul Vilayet," one man said to me, "are protesting angrily that by making Iraq independent we are handing them over to the tender mercies of Islam. Of course, their memories are long, and the Turks have only been out of Iraq for fourteen years, and, knowing nothing of the League or the Minorities Commission, they naturally trust nobody. At the same time there was no alternative if Iraq was to become the State which was sketched out in the post-war treaties. Time will show how real are the present fears of the Christian minorities ; but there will always be strong moral Christian forces in Iraq, British and otherwise ; and the Iraqi Government is quite aware that its handling of the minorities problem in the future will be closely watched by interested parties, and I believe, just as you believe, that Iraq is anxious to make good and to avoid unpleasant and unnecessary complications with Christendom."

But the Assyrians themselves have not yet attained so philosophical an outlook. I met one of the leaders of the community, and what he said was pathetic. We were speaking of Iraq and the League, but his only comment was that if the British Government handed them over to the Moslems they would all emigrate. "But where to ?" I asked. "That," he said, "we will decide later."

The topic of the British liquidation of their original responsibilities recurred in almost every conversation. When the Turks were expelled, the country was administered by a British executive with local help in the subordinate posts when it was available, and to all intents and purposes Iraq was a British colony in military occupation. Then, as plans for the creation of an independent State matured, it achieved first a Cabinet and later a King, and later still a Parliament ; and simultaneously executive power was gradually transferred from British to Iraqi hands, the former British executive chiefs remaining as advisers attached to the various ministries.

This was the state of affairs until Iraq entered the League and achieved complete independence. But independent Iraq does not propose at once to dispense with British assistance, and many British officials have been retained in the Government service ; but instead of being advisers they are, to all intents and purposes, foreigners employed in an expert capacity.

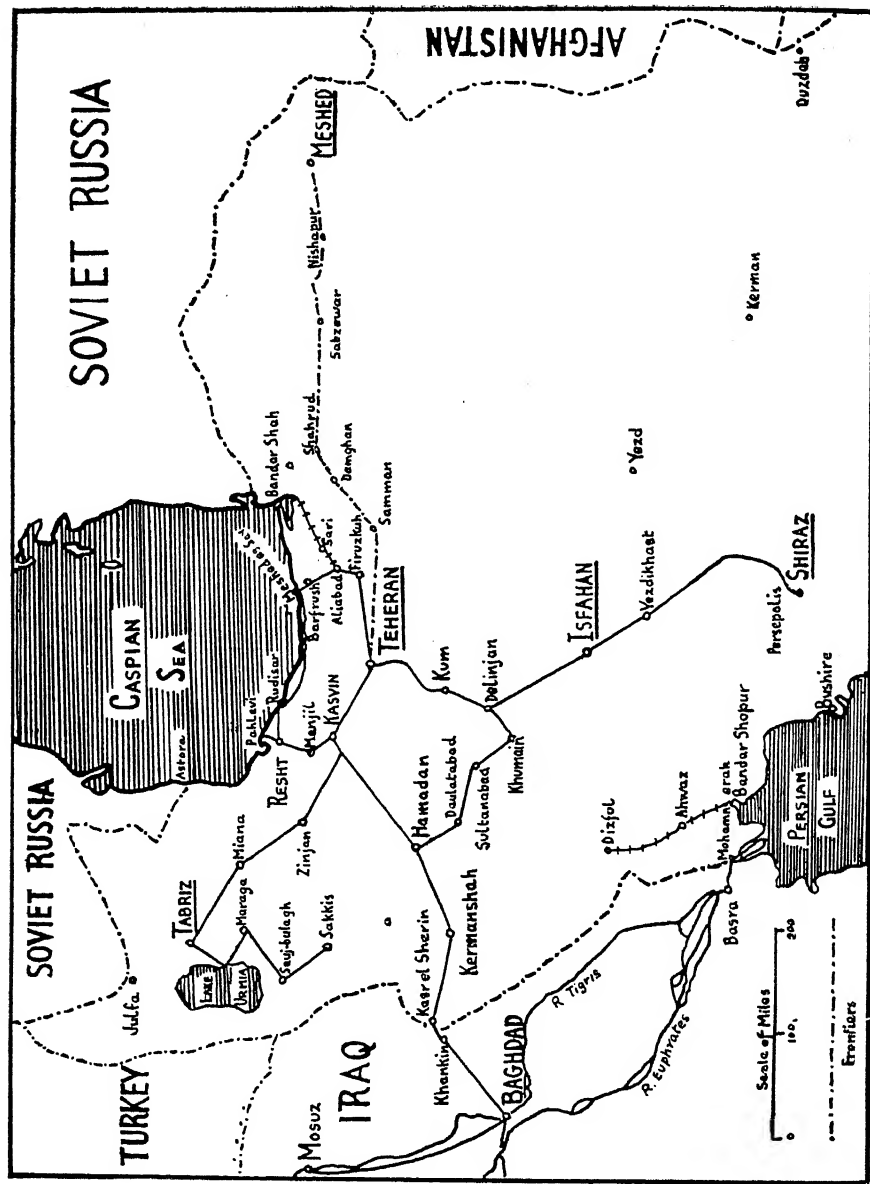
Their rôle is and will be far from easy. For Iraq is still in adolescence, and the adolescent youth, though quite ready to consult greater experience, is by no means so ready to accept the judgment of the expert. Youth, whether it is maturing in the East or in the West, always thinks it knows better ; and these foreign experts—if one may call them so—will now be called upon to say to unfettered Iraq administrators, "This and this shalt thou do," and how palatable these counsels will be to these administrators remains to be seen. But if Iraq has the will and the skill to learn how to use and conciliate this expert knowledge which the country itself cannot yet produce, all should be well.

Iraq has, however, another and more immediate problem—the government of its own people. As I have already suggested, the Iraq executive machine, although it works, is far from faultless, and there is still any amount of mal-administration, due partly to tactlessness and inefficiency and partly to nepotism and corruption. But the case I now quote is only an example, and must not be taken as condemning the Government wholesale. The scion of a powerful Arab family was posted to an important position in the Mosul Vilayet. He had neither brains nor experience, and was conceited and consequently utterly inefficient ; and eventually, in his cups, he tied a bit of string round the beard of a powerful sheikh and dragged the old man round and round his office. There was a great scandal, and he had to be removed. But he was not dismissed. His family saw to that. Instead he was transferred to an equally important position in an equally difficult part of the country. But his new employment was extremely boring, and he disliked the people whom he was supposed to administer ; and soon he was keeping important people waiting on his pleasure for hours and even days, and eventually, once again, he let himself go. He married the daughter of one of the most important families in the area, only to send her home next morning with a divorce. There was another scandal, and he had again to be removed. But again he was not dismissed, and in return his powerful family still supports the Government in being. Such isolated cases are naturally bandied

far and wide as gossip, and as a result the Government loses prestige and petty discontent becomes articulate.

But such real discontent as there is in the country is due more to economic than to administrative causes. Iraq, like the rest of the world, has suffered acutely from the slump, just as it benefited enormously from the boom of ten years ago. Then agricultural Iraq was very rich. The Arab farmers had good crops and sold them well ; their herds prospered and prices were high ; and with their extra money they bought undreamed-of luxuries—sugar, tea, tinned goods, boots and the like ; and over and above they had money and to spare for their taxes, and the Government shared their facile prosperity. Then the bottom fell out of the market and there was no money either for luxuries or for taxes. But the Government had to have money, and by this time it had an administration which was powerful enough and efficient enough to see that it got it. No longer, as in the days of the Turks, could the taxpayer buy immunity by bribery ; he had to pay, although world conditions were reducing him to the verge of bankruptcy ; and to-day many not only bitterly regret the "good old days" but are actually "agin the Government".

But once more I hasten to add that it would be gross exaggeration to suggest that there is dangerous unrest in the country. All one can say is that the Iraqi taxpayer, like the taxpayer in practically every other country in the world, is to-day harassed, resentful, and broke. Not that there is likelihood of a famine. For the needs of the Iraq *fellahin* are small and his powers of survival immense. At the same time he will welcome intensely any wise spending by the Government of the new oil royalties which will improve his produce and create for him an adequate market for his surplus.



CHAPTER XXII

INTO PERSIA

AS the time approached for us to leave Baghdad, we kept saying to each other how glad we would be to shake the dust of disillusion off the soles of our feet, but when the actual moment of departure came we both were suddenly ashamed. Leaving New Street out of the question, Baghdad itself had not been entirely to blame for our mood. We had not given it a chance. Our thoughts had been elsewhere—in Persia—and our interest likewise; and Persia, the goal of all our journeyings, had completely swamped Baghdad as the live topic of the moment. In fact, we had been impossibly restive all our ten days among the Iraqi fleshpots. So our farewells in the end were almost apologetic.

But soon all such sentimentalities were forgotten in the fun of being again on the road with our gear snug and tidy in the rumble behind us, and ahead of us Persia. New Street was its inevitable self—donkeys and all—and then a sharp turn into the east by the railway station and we were past the walls of Baghdad and out into the desert. It looked frightful country—dry and arid; a young sandstorm was blowing from the south, and only occasionally did we see the horizon below clouds of heavy brown dust. Our track was wide and straight, but much cut up by traffic—lorries and grossly overladen country carts stacked with stone for roadmaking; and four miles out we met a column of armoured cars belonging to the Iraq Army. And then we were suddenly hailed by a very decrepit old Arab, wearing a cloak riddled with holes and nothing else. He did not want a lift; but he had a cigarette and five matches and no matchbox. Would we give him a strike? We gave him a full box, and at once he was embarrassingly grateful and I was kissed all over down to the toe-cap of my right shoe—everywhere, in fact, except on the lips. But it was all entirely in keeping with our mood, and time passed happily as we talked of plans ahead and of what Persia would be like.

Two hours out from Baghdad we passed Baqubah, where the Assyrian war-refugees had been camped before they were repatriated to the north ; and so to the Diala river with its sudden groves of palm trees and its rail-cum-road bridge ; and then for another hour we crossed and recrossed the railway running dead straight through empty yellow fly-blown scrub country, so empty that indeed every tree was an interest and a house or a man a positive thrill. By this time we were hungry and parched with the storm ; so when we got to Shahrabad we chose a more or less sheltered spot behind a whistling palm grove and lunched grittily, watched by a large and interested crowd. And after Shahrabad we at last started climbing and were soon in foothills with the plain of the Tigris dropping behind us to the west.

But these foothills were scalding hot. The wind was behind us ; we were smothered in our own dust ; the car boiled ; and our eyes smarted and our lips cracked ; and all around us a landscape of flabby brown hills like the toasted white of egg on the top of that most disgusting of all puddings—the Victoria pudding. Of course, there were no people and no villages, but despite the isolation and the heat we were far from bored. Hosts of locust hoppers, wingless and in the grasshopper stage, were moving our way and literally carpeted our uneven track. We must have killed millions. But we were not the only killers. Huge droves of storks strolled among them eating without discrimination, and then they would flap away on their slow wings to the top of a hill and face into the wind with their great yellow beaks agape to give air to their surfeited throats and bellies. Foraging with them were droves of bee-eaters. On the wing they were a joy to the eyes, the green of their plumage flashing and transparent like the green of the underside of a wave. The third murderer was the iguana, a huge barbed-tailed lizard who licked up the hoppers with a six-inch tongue, much as a magnet licks up nails. Roy chased two of them and got one by the tail, just as it was disappearing down a hole. He regretted his enterprise at once, for the barbs on the tail took great slivers out of the palm of his hand and hurt him considerably. There were vultures as well, nasty white obscene birds ; but they were equally indifferent to the hoppers and to us, and would hardly move out of our way to give us passage.

Thus an hour and a half passed and we covered another thirty miles, and just as the sun was beginning to sink we were through the foothills and out on to a wide plain stretching

ahead in great rolling undulations. It was less empty and patches of it were cultivated, and suddenly over a rise we saw the first palm trees of Kaniqin where we were to spend the night before crossing the frontier. Our road ran wide between high, mud-brick garden walls, and above them long rows of palms nodded their feathered heads to greet us. And then we were in the town itself, a *café-au-lait* town, a tangle of box-like architecture and a hive of the wildest-looking Kurds. Kurds have to be seen to be believed, and I hope that I may never meet one in a dark lane on a moonless night. They look like devils and dress like buccaneers: their tunics are black and their trousers baggy; their waist-bands are festooned with knives and other lethal weapons; their hair hangs to the neck after the fashion of Richard Hunchback; their moustaches are huge and their beards short and strong. Indeed, with their fierce eyes and bronzed skins they look lords of the wilds with centuries of cruel life behind them.

Customs were refreshingly simple, thanks to a British official who took us under his wing. We were, he said, the last Englishmen whom he could help, for his contract with the Iraq Government was finished, and his place was being taken by an Iraqi. He was rather bitter about it all. "I served here and we conquered this rotten country for the Arabs, and then we stayed on to see them into the saddle. And now after fourteen years I'm axed." He was but one of many resentful officials victims, as they described themselves, of cynical British policy.

Our host for the night was the manager of the Kaniqin Oil Refinery, and after we were finished with the Customs we drove some four miles out of the town to his camp. The oil installation is completely surrounded with high barbed wire, for Kurds are not too particular as to rights of possession; and after handing over our matches to the sentry at the gate—for no smoking is allowed within the camp—we drove up to the manager's house, where we found a wonderful welcome and most comfortable quarters. But both of us had a wretched night. In the early hours of the morning the wind shifted, and drifted the fumes of the refinery into our rooms. I woke, and almost instinctively my hand stretched out for my gas-mask. I was back in war-time and the sensation was very similar. My lungs felt tainted and stiff, and soon I became so stifled that I could no longer lie flat, and in the end I had to prop myself up with relays of pillows and sit out the last two hours before dawn like a galloping consumptive in the last stages.

After breakfast our kind Scotch host lent us the services of his Persian interpreter to pilot us across the frontier, and we were away early back into Kaniqin, and after a run of a mile or so drew up under the shadow of the last Iraqi post, perched high on a dry, steep hill like a mediæval castle. The passport office was below by the roadside, and a polite policeman gave us Persian tea, slightly sugared, slightly scented, milkless, and served in jolly little glass tumblers, while our passports were stamped. Then the wooden barrier across the road was raised and we chugged out into "no man's land" between the two countries, to draw up five minutes later opposite a similar barrier which would admit us into the land of the Shah of Shahs.

Persia started beautifully. Both of us had been slightly nervous about our entry: for tackling a new country and a strange language is always an ordeal. But nothing could have been jollier than our Persian reception. The Customs officer, who wore smart khaki and green tabs, spoke excellent French—Persian Customs have for years been organized under the supervision of Belgian officials—and a letter of introduction which the Persian Minister in Baghdad had kindly given me, quickly made life not only simple but really entertaining. The little official was hospitality itself; and, far from being a Paul Pry, he seemed far keener on giving us more and more glasses of Persian tea than on investigating our baggage for contraband. And formalities over the lorry were just as easy and simple. We were not called upon to pay any tax or deposit; there was no tiresome argument about horse-power, the size of the wheels or the like; all we had to do was to buy a *permis de circulation*, on which was written the number of the car and the registration number of the engine, and we paid at the rate of four shillings a day for the use of the Persian highway. We bought forty days' worth, and were informed that if we did not use the whole period a refund would be made to us when leaving, or that if we overstayed our permit we would be called on to adjust matters at the end. There was only one stipulation: we must not ply for hire or carry passengers or accept transport of goods.

Then money. The import of foreign money is controlled, and both of us had to declare our sterling and rupees. The amounts were registered on a currency permit and we were told that when the time came for us to leave we would only be allowed to take out with us foreign currency up to the amount we had declared on entry. In this respect Persia was strictly copying Central European and Russian regulations.

All these preliminaries were conducted in the Customs office, with Roy and me sitting on a sofa with our tea while our host wrote at a desk facing us. Directly above his desk a swallow had built its nest against one of the rafters of the ceiling, and after a while, noticing that I was watching the birds, he broke away from what he was doing to explain. "Swallows in the house," he said, "mean peace in the house." "But," I replied, "doesn't your desk get in a frightful mess?" He laughed and, climbing on his chair, hung the lid of a biscuit tin from four hooks in the ceiling under the nest like the tray of a birdcage. He then gave me a good smile. "We Persians," he commented shyly, "are great engineers. Nothing defeats us. I and my desk are now safe, and the swallows are happy, and my house will be happy."

All this took perhaps an hour and four relays of tea, and then, armed with our papers, the little official and all his staff came out into the clearing in front of his office and shook us warmly by the hand. Finally, with an almost dramatic wave of his arm, he ordered the barrier to be raised. It was a great moment for us, and we felt quite as excited as we had felt when we left Suez for Sinai. We were crossing the threshold into unknown Persia.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO KERMANSHAH

FROM the top of the hill above the Customs Station Persia at first sight looked very empty. But I have used the word "empty" so often in connection with landscape that I feel it needs interpretation. Try in your mind's eye to parch all the grass off the Quantock Hills round Taunton, then put on imaginary orange-tinted spectacles and open your eyes, and, if the effort has not been too much for you, you will be seeing what we saw. The hills were squat and rounded, the dips between them were shallow and easy-sided, and even in the valleys the sparse vegetation was dry and dusty; and everything was tinged with that lurid orange glare which we sometimes get at home on a stifling day just before the thunder breaks from a far horizon. It was very hot, but our road was tolerable and the gradients were easy, and as we went on it became slowly cooler, for we were climbing hard, and after twenty miles we were 700 feet above Kaniqin and ahead of us lay our first Persian town.

It was Kasr el Sherin, and to our surprise it was another control station for passports and Customs, and a fat and fussy policeman dressed in a French war-time tin hat and wearing a uniform—tunic and breeches but no puttees—of butcher-blue linen summoned us to halt behind another road barrier. Kasr el Sherin gave us a truer and less edifying insight into the workings of New Persia. It was the first of the innumerable control stations which were to hold us up on every road in Persia, and it gave us, so to speak, our baptism of red-tape. Each control station had its Dogberry, and every Dogberry positively thirsted to inscribe in his massive and greasy many-columned ledger all and any information about us. Indeed, before we had been two days in the country both of us were convinced that in New Persia constables become sergeants according to the speed with which they can collect entries for their ledgers. They are quite nice about it, of

course, and nothing could have been more courtly than the way in which the fussy fat Dogberry of Kasr el Sherin conducted us personally to the passport office. There life at first was extremely complicated. The fact of the matter was we didn't know the game. But when we tumbled to it that they didn't mind in the slightest what answers we made to their questions (which we only dimly understood), so long as we did say something—anything—which they could enter in the ledger, all was plain sailing—but a very long voyage. Surname and Christian name, father's name, mother's name, where born, where living, last place of residence, age, occupation, reasons for visiting Persia, probable length of stay, and at least five more searching posers. As far as I was concerned, all went well until we sailed into Dublin Bay where I was born. Dublin just wouldn't go into Persian. So, to everybody's satisfaction, I conveniently changed my nationality and was reborn in London. Roy took the tip and in sympathy abandoned his Cumberland cradle; and thenceforward as a pair of full-blown Cockneys we toured Persia. All this took a long time, but Persian time is not very valuable, and the Dogberries, far from becoming restive over our very inadequate knowledge of their mother-tongue, enjoyed themselves greatly, while we suffered gladly. And eventually every column in the ledger was satisfactorily full, the road-barrier was raised, and we all shook hands and off we went again.

For a time we were still in the orange foothills, but soon the blue outline of the great Zagros range broke through a hazy horizon beyond a vast stretch of prairie country, all spattered with flocks of Kurdish sheep; and every mile we went the country was becoming greener and cleaner. Physically Persia is not unlike an inverted soup-plate. We were now crawling over the rim—the foothills. Those mountains ahead were its steep and formidable sides, and beyond we would be on the base of the plate and out on to the great central Persian plateau, where we would remain throughout all our stay, except when we were to drop down the northern side on to the Caspian rim. As we got closer to the mountains they began to look more and more exciting. Our first obstacle was an outpost range, a long granite razor-back, perhaps nine hundred feet high and noduled along the crest like the back of a prehistoric monster; and for three miles or so we skirted its rock-strewn base. Then there was a sharp turn to the left, a short pass, and we were through the outpost line and searching the main system for the opening of the Pai Tak pass which we had to cross.

Our fellow travellers on the road were quite as exciting as the mountains ahead. The Persian Kurd is an exaggerated version of his Iraqi brother. He is taller and thinner ; his hair is longer and more matted ; his skin seems darker and his swathed turban more voluminous ; and he certainly carried more weapons in his belt than we had seen on the Iraqi side of the frontier. Both of us decided that the Kurdish exterior does not invite exploration. But we had no trouble. Quite the reverse. We had stopped for lunch by a stream just below the entrance to the pass, and every passer-by saluted us ; and one old gentleman, flapping on the stern of a donkey, was so good as to stop and, after great tugging at his henna-stained beard, to honour us with low smiling salaams. Finally two very bellicose-looking youths arrived just in time to see the last of our pineapple-chunks disappear down our throats, and without any fuss they helped us to wash the plates in the stream, and when we restarted climbed soberly into the rumble for a lift to the next village.

It was Pai Tak village, and, leaving it, we were at once climbing. At first we rose in slow sweeps round easy contours ; then we switched abruptly into the mountains along a fine terrace of a road cut in the sheer walls of a ravine, at the end of which we had to negotiate four wicked hairpin turns which in a mile and a half raised us over one thousand feet. This was the worst stage of the climb. But when I say "worst", I do not mean that any of it was really bad, for the road is marvellously good, well graded and surfaced and, above all, unfrightening. It is really a triumph of road-construction, and to our great content it was last reconstructed by British military effort after the war.

The British soldier, like Darius the Achemenian, has left a name behind him : Private McGregor, Private Jones, Private Smith, Private Dooley—we made out the names, cut deep and rough in the granite, and at the head of the ravine on a fine rock face, the record of the pioneer work of the 289th Punjabis, dated 1921. But these memorials are also sad. They are all that survives of the British post-war dream of Persian regeneration on the lines of Cromer's regeneration of Egypt forty years before. The Anglo-Persian agreement had been signed : we were embarked on a programme of reconstruction with Baghdad as our base : and it behoved us to have perfect road communications to Teheran. We spent millions on the scheme, but the Persians failed to ratify the agreement, having got all our money for nothing. One day they may be sorry.



THE ZAGROS MOUNTAINS



THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS OF PERSIA

After the dream had faded a wit in Baghdad wrote of the road :

Half a Lakh
Half a Lakh
Half a Lakh squandered.'

Possibly. But at the moment we did not share the poet's views. As we climbed and climbed, we were extremely grateful for that half-lakh which was giving us such fine going.

Above the hairpin turns the road flattened out pleasantly and we were in mountain valleys with far away a cleft in a ridge of peaks where the pass would ultimately end. It was lovely well-treed country, with jolly springs and good noisy torrents tumbling down the hillsides ; and everywhere a whiff of spring, even in the squalid Kurdish villages where the women sat spinning by the doors and the men squatted on their flat roofs smoking their afternoon pipe of peace.

At the top of the pass the country opened into a huge plain as flat as your hand. But it was not dull. North and south there were distant ridges of blue mountains, and the plain was well cultivated and had the smell of prosperity, and every now and then, by-passing the official and bumpy road, there was an alternative track through the fields with good hard going across red loam where we could open out to twenty and twenty-five miles an hour. We were now nearly six thousand feet up and it was cool and clear, and, after the sultriness of the Tigris valley, life was very good. We passed Karind, which was to have been the Simla of Baghdad's post-war dream, and there we had any amount of difficulty in stopping a party of policemen from loading us up with about a dozen bulky faggots of wood for a police station ahead. But after a lot of shouting we did extricate ourselves, only to be landed, some ten miles further on, in a second and far more complicated hold-up.

We were cruising along quietly in the highlands, up hill and down dale, when suddenly round a bend of the road we saw ahead of us, midway through a village, a platoon of very young soldiers lined across the road with their rifles at the carry. We drove on, but they did not budge, and we had to pull up sharp. Whereupon eight of the soldiers, without so much as a "By your leave", put their kit—and there was lots of it—into the rumble and then clambered aboard themselves. This was New Persia with a vengeance. The Government apparently economizes in military transport, and when

it gives a movement order to its troops, it is to-day an understood thing that the troops shall find their own transport from post to post. This platoon had found us, and we felt most awkward. Up to a point we were quite ready "in Rome to do as Romans do", but within limits. And the limit of our safe carrying capacity was three men. Eight were out of the question. So I leaped out of the driving-seat and, turning up the page of numerals in my manual of *Persian Self-Taught*, started shouting so that everyone could hear, "One, two, three!" Then I went round the lorry and in succession tapped five legs, indicating as well as I could that none of the legs were wanted by us and that the owners must get down. Whereupon one of the owners threatened me with the butt of his rifle. Whereupon I screamed louder than ever.

By this time quite a useful crowd from the village had arrived. And they were on our side. For apparently the platoon had been billeted on them against their wishes, and they were delighted to see someone standing out against the extortions of the licentious soldiery. But, despite their moral support, nothing happened, and the eight were still on board. Then Roy had a brainwave. He restarted the engine, which made the army think that they had won; but instead Roy put the car into reverse, and with diabolic skill proceeded to career downhill with frightful jerks; and, to our intense pleasure, we could hear eight necks cracking in the rumble as jerk followed jerk. The villagers were enchanted: this was really the proper way to treat the army: and, feeling that we now had them articulately on our side, we drew up and I descended and again tapped the three men on the legs whom we would take with us. Four of the others had already clambered out—they had had enough of our car and its jerks; and then the corporal in charge, seeing that we meant business, played up trumps. He drew his bayonet and with the flat of the blade proceeded to belabour the remaining unwanted passenger out of the rumble. And then everybody—ourselves, the soldiers, and the villagers—roared with laughter and off we went.

So far, so good. But our three passengers, though amiable, were armed, and we were not, and there are bandits in Persia as well as in England. So when we were well clear of the village, Roy stopped the car, and by signs I ordered each soldier to present his rifle for inspection. There was a live round in every chamber. So without more ado I made the three of them get out on to the road and unload. I might have been on the range at Bisley. And then to appease them—for they were most

indignant—I brought them to the slope and took their photographs. That won them completely.

Half an hour later we were very glad of their friendship. We were climbing a long tiresome pass, and overtook a civilian lorry which had been commandeered by so many troops that it had given up the ghost and the troops were stranded. When they saw us, all rushed to board, and had it not been for our three warriors, who by now were our staunch allies, we would have been swamped. They used their rifle butts like Trojans, and one by one the invaders staggered back defeated; then Roy accelerated brilliantly and, to the intense joy of our three passengers, we were clear.

By this time it was getting late and, with the sun low behind us, the hills ahead looked lovely; and though there were still no trees, all the valleys were greener and strips of cultivation ran ever higher up the mountain sides. And the road remained tolerably good, and when we reached the Kermanshah Customs House, where the three soldiers left us, there was still a good hour of daylight left. The Customs were no trouble at all, as our frontier permit worked beautifully; and after not more than a ten-minute delay we were in, or rather driving round, Kermanshah. For our road showed so little desire to enter the town that in the end we were almost nervous that it would drift past altogether. These circular bypass roads were features of every town we met along the road to Teheran, and were made for military reasons, to avoid the congestion of the narrow streets which are the feature of every Persian town.

We had been told of a tolerable hotel—of course it was called the Bristol; but before we found it, we spotted the office of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, where we had an introduction; and one of the clerks, a rather oily little Jew called Isaac, took us automatically under his wing; and so we reached the hotel. Roy stayed in the street to mind the car and our gear, while I went in to book rooms; but when I reappeared, there was poor Roy standing grimly by the car, and surging all round him a noisy light-fingered crowd. Isaac was grand. He made several high-voiced staccato noises; a policeman appeared from the other side of the road; the crowd withdrew; and in another ten minutes the car was safely in a locked garage and we and our luggage were installed in our rooms. My room was small, but comfortable and oddly homelike. Two planks of the ceiling were marked with the stencils of Messrs. Bryant and May's packing-cases, and the verandah

outside my window was paved with a mosaic of Libby's, Tate, Maypole, and Bovril.

The hotel proprietor, an elderly and distinguished-looking Syrian who knew Cyprus and Egypt, was both kind and efficient. First he produced water to wash off the layers of dust with which we were covered; then two relays of Persian tea; and finally excellent baths in a dark and rather noisome cubbyhole, but piping hot. We rested until dinner, or rather we tried to rest, but sleep was quite impossible. The street below our windows was the lounging-haunt of the élite of Kermanshah. Every second shop was a café, and every café had a gramophone. The men sat in the cafés and the women on the edge of the pavement, and all smoked hubble-bubbles, drank tea, and ate preserved fruits; and at least one lady out of every three was suckling a baby with complete indifference to Western conventions of modesty. The men wore rather cheap European clothes and, of course, the "Pahlevi" hat. It is the official headdress of Persia by order of Shah Riza Khan, but it is not beautiful in appearance. It is a compromise between a French staff officer's *képi* and the type of railway porter's hat which flourished in England in the 'sixties. But if the men looked slightly modernized, the women were very Moslem and almost mediæval. Over their skirts and blouses they wear a huge black shroud which robs them of all line of figure, and above their eyes across their foreheads they have a broad black eyeshade, rather like a tennis visor; and when they draw their shrouds across their mouths, as they do on sight of a man, they look exactly like crows bobbing up and down over a freshly sown field.

After dinner the two of us went out to *shem el nessim* (sniff the breezes). It was a lovely night, but we did not enjoy our walk. As we issued from the hotel, the jackals issued from their obscene lairs; and in five minutes we had a pack at our heels and soft insinuating voices followed us out of the darkness: "*Madame. Hanum. Very good. Very cheap*". For a mile they continued their yapping, but we held our heads high in the air and returned safely to our virgin beds. I undressed to a medley of sound—gramophones, dogs, amorous cats, motor-hooters and strolling males walking home and singing as they walked. But it was all somehow soothing; and when I slept, I slept perfectly.

CHAPTER XXIV

KERMANSHAH AND TAGH-I-BUSTAN

OUR Hotel Bristol—like all Hotels Bristol—was a very popular rendezvous and a grand place for gossip ; and in the smoking-cum-writing-cum-dining-room, thanks to my English cigarettes, I made hosts of friends, and we cussed everything—the Shah, the Slump, and the Anglo-Persian Oil concession. But I was not yet into my political stride, so I turned the conversation into interesting trivialities as soon as I could.

Early on the day of all smart Kermanshah dinner-parties each guest will receive a visit from his host's cook, who must be given a formal interview. The cook will present himself, watch in hand, and with many salaams will request the guest to synchronize with him. It is not all so silly as it sounds. For Kermanshah has no official time, and every wise householder works according to his cook's version of the hour, so that his guests shall arrive not when science says that it is 8 p.m., but when the cook's watch decides that his time has come to serve dinner.

Again, sneezing in Persia. It is very unlucky to sneeze once, but it is all right if you sneeze twice. A surgeon was in the middle of an operation, when his assistant perpetrated one terrific sneeze. At once all stopped work waiting for the wretched assistant to produce a second spasm. He did his best, but five minutes passed before he succeeded in producing the desired result. By that time the patient was dead. And then everybody said that the death was due to the single sneeze—which, of course, was quite true.

High Moslem society in the town is very correct, and the regulations of the *harem* are very strict, and when the wife of a high Moslem official wishes to call on a Christian lady she takes no risks at all. First she explains in detail the hour at which she will arrive and the way by which she will come ; and ten minutes before her expected arrival a watcher must be put on the roof of the Christian house, and as soon as he

reports the approach of the Moslem carriage, every male in the place, including the husband, must depart or hide, and if the Christian hostess has normally no woman-servant in the house to open the door, somebody must be hired and dressed for the part to receive the *grande dame*. And any Christian lapse means Moslem social ostracism for ever.

Eventually I wearied of gossip, and I was just leaving the hotel in a cab to visit the Kurdish quarter of the town, when a car drew up beside me and out of it stepped an Englishman whom I had last seen in Beirut. It was a very jolly meeting; but he was oddly mysterious and suggested that it would be better if we talked in the privacy of my bedroom. There he explained. He had made a flying visit to Teheran from Syria, but when entering Persia at Kaniqin he had forgotten to declare his British sterling, of which he still had £100 in notes on him. By law, he could not get them out of Persia except by stealth, and Kermanshah was his last stop before Kaniqin, and my room was his last privacy where he could store the notes away on his person. Did I mind? It was great fun. We put twenty pounds into the sole of each shoe and sixty pounds in the lining of his hat, with the result that when he emerged at the hotel door to re-enter his car, he looked exactly like Charlie Chaplin, over-small hat, stilted walk and all.

My cab was still waiting, and when I had seen Charlie Chaplin away, off I went to the Kurdish quarter of the town. It was a pleasant change after the turmoil of the "Bristol". The men lolled idly on their roofs in the sun; the women sat on their doorsteps and divided their interest between gossip with a next-door neighbour and spinning wool with hand-worked spindles; while the children, fine hardy little things, were all over the place, playing very sensible games of "catch" with worsted balls. The quarter was well supplied with shops, and every shop, that was not a café, was gay with rough Kurdish carpets and great lengths of camel-hair tenting. Kermanshah is the great market for both products, and when we arrived the winter's output of carpets was just beginning to trickle in from the outlying country. In Persia the winter is devoted to carpet-making and weaving, and the women, who have already worked all through the summer in the fields, are put to the looms so as to make more money for their lords and masters. When spring comes, the men of the tribes take their wives' labours down to the markets and calmly pocket the proceeds for their own purposes. One day there will be a suffragette movement in Kurdistan.

Isaac was to be free from his official duties between noon and 3 p.m., and we had planned a luncheon expedition with him out to Tagh-i-Bustan, the Arch of the Garden, to see which was the reason of our having prolonged our stay in Kermanshah for an extra day. Isaac was grand and punctual, and off we went across five easy flat miles until we almost bumped head-on into the sheer cliff of the long razor-backed massif which overshadows the plain of Kermanshah from the east. We lunched by a semi-ruined Khan with poplars whispering above us and by our table a jolly brook flowing out of the mountain-side. Below us it had been dammed into a series of ornamental ponds, round which more poplars had been planted. It was a perfect Persian garden.

As well as the Khan, there was, of course, a tea-shop—a *Chai-Khana*—and its proprietor lent us tea-glasses and a most efficient samovar, made out of an old petrol tin; and when we were finished he appointed himself as our guide to show us the sculptures. Our way led through the ruined Khan, and, entering, we looked down a steep flight of steps into a stone-sided oval pool, at one corner of which bubbled a mountain spring. There were pillars all round the water supporting the main building, and beyond them another row of lighter columns—a sort of loggia, which opened directly out to the sunlit garden which we had seen from above. With the play of light and shadow and the reflections in the pool, the Khan was quite beautiful. But it was in sad disrepair, and in one corner there was a gaping untidy hole like the entrance to a mine. Isaac told us about it. When the Russians occupied Kermanshah in the war, a spy told them that the treasure of the town was hidden in the Khan. They used gunpowder and blasted deep into the rock: but they found nothing, though Isaac would not say whether or no there had been anything to find.

At the bottom of the flight of steps, we walked out through the loggia on to a stone-paved terrace which soon narrowed into a rock-path skirting the foot of the mountain. The first monument was a bas-relief carved into the cliff. It had been much damaged by time, and I could only just make out a group of three figures which Lord Curzon identifies as a representation of Shapur I, the Sassanian Shah who in A.D. 260 captured Antioch and the Emperor Valerian, standing in the presence of the God Ormuzd over the prostrate figure of the last Parthian King. Some thirty yards further on, round a sharp angle of rock, stands the first and less important Arch of the

Garden. It is a shallow vaulted recess, carved sheer into the granite ; but the figures which Curzon suggests may be Shapur II and Shapur III, have suffered so at the hands of nature and vandals that they have no meaning at all.

And so round another corner to the great Arch of the Garden, Tagh-i-Bustan itself. It has survived marvellously. The recess is hewn some twenty feet into the solid rock ; its width is about the same ; from peak to pavement it measures at least thirty-five feet ; and for fifteen feet above and on both sides of the arch the rock-face has been smoothed and polished. Within are the memorials of King Chosroës II, who reigned in Persia about the time when Alfred the Great was burning the cakes in Somerset. The back wall is in two sections, one above the other. On the top, in the arch itself, the King, with a crown on his head and wearing heavy robes of state, stands between two less elaborate figures who are presenting him with more crowns ; while below and on the level of the pavement is a superb equestrian statue of Chosroës, which, however, has been sadly mutilated by vandals since the days of the Arab invasion. But even more interesting are the bas-reliefs which adorn the two side-walls of the Arch. One is in perfect and the other in excellent condition. They depict the King out "a-hunting". On the left a herd of royal elephants is charging a clump of reeds beside some water to drive a cowering wild boar up to the King's lance. On the right His Majesty is chasing the stag. At the top of the panel, with the Court bugles blowing, he starts out for the day mounted on a fine horse and sheltered from the sun under an umbrella. Below, a second scene shows the King, with the State elephants coursing behind like racing greyhounds, drawing his bow while the stag flees before him. At the bottom of the panel it is still just possible to make out the figure of the monarch, still on his horse but without his umbrella, riding back to his palace after a successful day. Both bas-reliefs have the cheerful atmosphere and the jolly charm of the Bayeux Tapestries ; and to both of us they were a great relief. For we *could* understand them.

And then everything was ruined and we might have been a pair of tourists at the Pyramids, where loathsome scabrous Arabs will, in five minutes, climb to the top and down again for a shilling. Here the tout was a wiry Kurd. I tried to dissuade him ; but before I could say 'Jack Robinson' he was up and away risking his life by climbing the sheer rockface with, as his object, a silly bunch of wild thyme growing in a crack some



FAGH-I-BUSTAN THE ARCH OF THE GARDEN

"THE GREAT ARCH HAS SURVIVED MARVELLOUSLY. THE DECESS TO



TAGH-I-BUSTAN

"WITHIN THE ARCH ARE THE MEMORIALS OF KING CHOSROES—A SUPERB EQUESTRIAN STATUE AND TWO BAS-RELIEFS ADORNING THE 'SIDE WALLS'."

three hundred feet above our heads. He looked like an idiotic fly on a window-pane, and I hated him for it, especially when, after accomplishing a hare-brained leap, he reached the flowers and then slithered all the way down to present a bloom, first to me, then to Roy. I did not tip him. He had marred what was otherwise a perfect expedition.

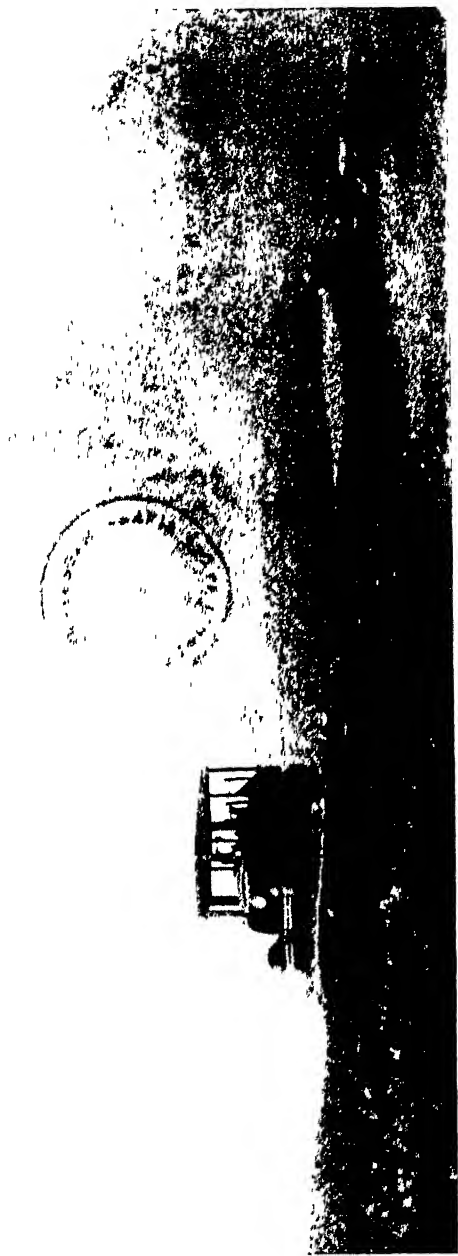
That night we dined at the British Consulate. It stands on a southerly slope above the town, and we entered through a really triumphal arch worthy to receive a prince. Beyond was a walled garden which was to have been the Consular garden. But it has yet to be made. What we saw was a vast sloping wilderness which only an army of gardeners and a redoubtable bank balance could reduce to order. But the salaries of the Levant Consular Service are notoriously meagre, and by consular regulations consuls are responsible for the maintenance of their own gardens. Hence this pathetic wilderness, which might so easily have been foreseen and avoided. Kermanshah Consulate is brand new and was conceived on a scale in keeping with the British dream of post-war Persia. But someone in Whitehall must have faltered in arithmetic, if he ever thought that a Levant consular salary could cope with the acres which he so easily painted "green for garden" on the tidy plans of the Office of Works.

CHAPTER XXV

BISITUN, ASSADABAD, HAMADAN

WE started on our second Persian stage to Hamadan in great form. Tagh-i-Bustan had whetted our appetite for Persian antiquity, and only twenty-five miles along our road would be the rock of Bisitun and the tablets of Darius, which in 1847 had yielded to the great British archæologist Sir Henry Rawlinson the secret of the cuneiform alphabet. I had seen the Rosetta Stone : and it has been to Egyptology what the Bisitun tablets are to Assyrian and Bablyonian archæology.

But those twenty-five miles to Bisitun took all the edge off our early-morning enthusiasm. A four-ton lorry was ahead of us, and nothing would induce it to allow us to pass ; and it was so overloaded that even on the flat it could hardly go more than twenty miles an hour. Persian lorries and Persian lorry-drivers and lorry-owners are the bugbears of Persian travel. The lorry is still the new toy of the country, and the Persian chauffeur drives with superb gusto and complete indifference to other travellers and to any rules of the road. The Persian lorry-owner is equally carefree. There are no overloading laws in the country, and his motto is, "Gather ye shekels while ye may, and let Allah look after the bits." First he crams in as much merchandise as possible, flush with the tailboard ; then, on top of that, he inserts as many human beings as there are sardines in a tin, and when they are safely stowed, wire flaps are lowered from the roof and the sardines become rabbits in a hutch. There still remain the running-boards and the wings, and on to them he ropes as much more merchandise as he can. Finally there is the roof. But it is only half-fare to those intrepids who are brave enough to risk life and limb on this precarious perch—as often as not in company with an odd sheep or a goat or maybe a parrot. The life of the Persian lorry is short and exciting ; but the owner does not worry : he has bought on the hire-purchase system and leaves it to Allah to look after the next instalment.



THE ROCK OF BISTUN

"CARVED HIGH ON THE ROCK ARE THE TABLETS OF DARIUS WHICH, IN 1847, HAD YIELDED TO SIR HENRY RAWLINSON THE SECRET OF CUNEIFORM ALPHABET SEEN FROM THE EAST THE ROCK LOOKS JUST LIKE GIBRALTAR,"



THE PERSIAN LORRY

"THERE ARE NO OVERLOADING LAWS IN PERSIA, AND THE MOTTO OF THE LORRY OWNER IS 'GATHER YE SHEKELS WHILE YE MAY, AND LET ALLAH LOOK AFTER THE BITS'."

For ten exasperating miles that four-tonner smothered us in dust, and whenever we tried to pass all the rabbits in the hutch screamed to the driver not to let himself be beaten; and whenever we got our bonnet just past his tailboard, he would swerve right across us and all but tip us into the ditch. And then all the rabbits would wave their arms and cheer—that is, if rabbits can cheer. But eventually, to our joy, all the packages on one running-board fell off in a lump and they had to stop; and so at last we got past.

The Bisitun rock is the last rampart of the long Tagh-i-Bustan range, and stands a good 1500 feet above the level of the plain, and, seen from the east, looks just like Gibraltar. We halted at its base to inspect the tablets; but to my surprise they looked extremely new, considering that they were stated to have been carved 2500 years ago. However, I duly photographed them and felt extremely proud of myself—for about two minutes. I then discovered that I had been looking at the wrong ones, which were quite modern and that the real tablets were high up the rock-face and quite impossible to photograph. However, we had a good look at them and were just able to make out the gigantic figure of Darius himself towering in the centre above a series of midget figures of kings whom, at one time or other, he had conquered and destroyed. We took our hats off to Sir Henry Rawlinson. It must have been a colossal feat to make his long transcriptions from so inaccessible a rock-face.

While we had been inspecting and photographing, the egregious lorry had once more caught us up, and as we continued along the plain, which gradually narrowed into a wide steep-sided valley, we could see, miles ahead of us, a white plume of dust where it travelled. Five miles east of Bisitun we found by the side of the road a tragic little group—two wildly gesticulating Kurds, a fine brindled collie dog and a donkey, and at their feet, in a pool of blood, a little black kid. It had been run over by the lorry and was in its death agonies. We stopped, and the two poor Kurds explained in pantomime what had happened, shaking their fists in the direction in which the lorry had disappeared. All I could think of doing to show my sympathy was to offer them two Krans and cigarettes. They refused the money awkwardly, but with shy smiles took the smokes; and then we shook them both by the hand and were off after the lorry. In due course we caught it up, and again the rabbits squealed and the lorry swerved, and we acquired yet another layer of dust. But at long last

we came to a by-pass which the lorry had rejected. We went at it hell-for-leather, while the driver, who had spotted our manoeuvre, accelerated wildly and the rabbits raised the welkin with their screams ; but we beat them by a neck, and for the next few miles crawled and had the sweet revenge of giving them our dust by way of a change.

By this time the valley had narrowed into the beginnings of a pass, and at 5500 feet we crossed the summit and ahead of us lay another wide plain with the huge range of the Assadabad Mountains shimmering ahead in the far distance. The going held good, and there were no more lorries to bother us—indeed, we passed nothing except two camel caravans barracked by the roadside having their midday meal, with their loads parked round them ready for the evening. For in Persia camel caravans travel mainly by night and lie up during the day. It was past noon when we reached the foot of the Assadabad Pass, and we halted for lunch and to cool the engine for the climb, about which we had been warned in Baghdad. But, as in the case of the Pai Tak, we had been told very exaggerated versions of its terrors. It is, of course, a tremendous pull, and has dangerous corners and testing gradients ; but we climbed the five miles in under half an hour, and only boiled once and had no real qualms of anxiety. But half-way up we met a bad crash. A repair gang with a derrick was hauling at a large touring-car which on the previous night had gone over the edge and had rolled eighty yards down the *Khud*. Later in Hamadan we asked for particulars of the accident. The answer was very Persian. "The man was a fool to have driven so carelessly. He had paid his last instalment on the car."

The top of the pass is 8200 feet high, and there were still great patches of winter snow in the sheltered places, and the air was rare and made our hearts thump. So while the lorry took a welcome rest to cool after the climb, we sat out in the sun and enjoyed a marvellous view of Hamadan, fifteen miles away to the east, where we were to spend the night, and behind it the blue rampart of Elvend Mountain, its slopes green with pine and its summit crowned with snow.

And so down a long twisting descent into the valley with the road ever good. By this time we had practically ceased to think about the roads. We had been told that they would be almost dangerous, but actually they had been always tolerable and often good. But what reassured us most was that on every stage we had met road-making gangs repairing

and maintaining the track. These road-makers are eloquent of the best of Shah Riza's reforms. Our road from Baghdad has, of course, existed from time immemorial. It has always been the great caravan trade-route to the markets of Baghdad; all through recorded history invading armies have marched and countermarched its long length; and for 1200 years it has been the sacred way of Persian pilgrims to the holy Shiah tombs in Kerbela and Nejaf in Iraq. But during the fifty years before Shah Riza came to the throne it had been more or less a foreign route, and Russian, Turkish, and British armies had used and maintained it throughout. As a result, Persian effort on the road had been negligible. To-day, however, foreign interference in Persia is taboo. But the Persian road is not suffering; and it is a real tribute to Riza Khan that to-day not only are new Persian tracks being made, but the old ones are also being maintained by Persian road-gangs paid by the Persian Treasury.

As at Kermanshah, our entry into Hamadan was by a wide detour which avoided the narrowness of the town streets. Indeed, we had fetched a compass round three-quarters of the town before we at last reached a cross-roads which gave us admittance. We were to stay in the Hôtel de France, and at the cross-roads we asked a policeman for instructions, and with pleasant hospitality he left his point duty and jumped on board and piloted us safely to our destination. Once there, we thanked him as well as we could, but he refused to go; and eventually we had to ask the hotel proprietor to find out if anything was wrong. It then transpired that when we had accosted Dogberry he had thought that we looked lost and in trouble, and so he had accompanied us to see whether we had any charge to lay against any malefactor who had troubled us on our road.

The Hôtel de France almost deserves a chapter of its own. We entered by a huge gateway and passed into a small courtyard planted with budding fruit trees. Beyond, up a small slope, was a large garden—a Persian garden. A Persian garden is not a place for flowers—for Persia is not a country for flowers; so the Persians have created a type of their own. It is formal in design, rather after French fashion, and its features are trees and shrubs and ornamental water. This hotel garden was quite perfect. There were long avenues of high pollarded poplars just bursting into leaf, and between them, in full spring bloom, rows and rows of grafted fruit trees—cherry, almond, apple, and pear; and rustling above this wealth of pink and

white blossom was the transparency of the pale green shoots of the poplars shaking in the breeze. Cut through the plantation were straight vistas, and where they intersected there were brimming water-tanks, stone lined and crystal clear. And seen dimly through the trees was a long low verandahed square of buildings where we had our rooms. We took our Persian tea on the verandah, and all the beauty of a Persian spring lay at our feet. It was lovely.

Hamadan is the old Ecbatana where Ahasuerus dallied with Esther, and Haman and Mordecai strove for the mastery; later it was from Ecbatana that the Magi, according to tradition, set forth on their mission to Bethlehem; and its name then, as does its modern Persian transcript Hamadan, means the meeting of the ways. Thus for centuries Hamadan had an importance all of its own both as a great fortress on a great military route and as a pilgrims' halt for pious Shiahs on their way to Nejaf and Kerbela. But time and circumstance have altered everything. To-day it is but a backward Persian town with a dwindling trade and a vanished importance; and of the days of Darius naught remains save the reputed tombs of Esther and Mordecai and a long low hill to the north-west of the present town in which are said to be hidden the ruins of the citadel of Ahasuerus and possibly also the remains of his treasury. This hill is one of the great sites which have yet to be excavated; and it is believed that the new Shah, unlike his predecessors, is not averse to giving his sanction to expert archæology from the West to probe secrets which should be well worth the probing.

Hamadan, like Kermanshah, has a brand new British consulate, which is also a rather pathetic reminder of our post-war Persian dream, and adjoining its garden is a beautifully kept little war cemetery. It staged an episode of real pathos. After fifteen years the body of a British officer—I will not give his name, though it was stencilled on the sacking around his coffin—had been exhumed in Sultanabad to be brought to Hamadan for concentration in the official cemetery. The coffin arrived while we were there. It was slung pick-a-back across the broad shoulders of an old Persian porter, and he dumped it head-downwards at the consul's feet, loudly demanding his fare. I know that there were nothing but bones in the coffin, but the incident was horribly poignant. The officer had had a terrible end. He was in the South Persian Rifles in charge of a difficult mountainous area, and one day he was ambushed and badly wounded in a village. His men fled and

he was left in the hands of his murderers. At once they were terrified at what they had done, and, dreading reprisals if it ever came out that he had died in their village, they passed the poor fellow, despite his wounds, from one village to another, so that the onus of his death should be spread. Eventually a British Consul heard of what was happening and, after enormous difficulty, found the wounded man. But it was too late. Two days later he died. It was a terribly tragic tale ; but now, at any rate, he will rest for all time in Hamadan among his own folk.

CHAPTER XXVI

"GEORGE" AND TEHERAN

FROM the point of view of our travel, Hamadan was our most important landmark, for Hamadan produced George. Up to then we had been utter tourists. Our knowledge of Persian was so slight as to be almost valueless save for the essentials of life, and we had felt all the time just like Milton's Lucifer: "We had been with the Persians, but not of them." The British Consul in Hamadan was an old friend of my Egyptian days, and he told us that we must have a Persian servant who could talk English, and that he would do his best to find us a suitable man. So he let it be known in the domestic market of the town that there was a smart vacancy on our travelling staff, and two hours later there were three candidates—an Armenian with yellow boots, a Kurd with the most extraordinary smell, and "George". We took George. He was a Moslem, his people came from Daulatabad, and he had been educated in an American school and spoke American-English with considerable gusto, and we liked his looks. For, although he was far from smart, he had an open manly face and a good twinkle in his eye and a great "Haw, haw!" of a laugh which went off on the slightest provocation. We engaged him at once and told him to come round the following morning to learn to find his way among our gear.

His real name, of course, was not "George", but Mohamed Ali Khan Lotfallian; but, by the time he turned up the following morning, both of us had completely forgotten such a mouthful, and, as I had to address him somehow, I said: "Good morning, George." He looked at me quite blankly and then remarked that he did not understand, and that his name was Mohamed Ali Khan Lotfallian. I then had a brainwave of which I am considerably proud. I couldn't tell him that such a rigmarole was quite beyond our capacity, so I just smiled and remarked that he was now joining a British outfit and would for the time being be one of a British team, and so we

had rechristened him British. "But don't think that we were slapdash about it," I added. "We took a lot of trouble, and now you are called George after the King of England." For a moment George looked blanker than ever, and then suddenly he let out a terrific "Haw, haw!" and grinned all over. I had touched his sense of humour and his vanity. For he was a great snob. But he was by no means an ornamental snob. Two days later he turned up in the morning with a quarter of an inch of saffron stubble on his chin. I am never at my best on waking, and the sight of George excited my worst passions.

"George," I said, "I do wish you would shave. You look a perfect fright."

George smiled blandly.

"Sir," he replied, "I can't shave. I have lost my scissors." That roused me still more.

"Rot," I said. "Aren't you a man? Men use razors."

George smiled wider than ever.

"I don't," he said; "they make my teeth ache."

As I was to learn in the next five weeks, George always got the last word.

He made a fine start with us. We had betted overnight that he would be late, but he was on the tick and worked like a beaver over the loading and was generally very efficient and excited; and—what pleased me greatly—he laughed loudly—"Haw, haw!"—at all my jokes. But as usual it was raining, and when we turned at the mound of Ahasuerus' Citadel to take a last look at Hamadan, Mount Elvend was lost in cloud and the town itself was half hidden in a swirl of mist. However, the rain laid the dust, and, though we shivered, the car enjoyed the cold and we made good going along a road which stretched dead flat, mile after mile, across an interminable plain into a bleak horizon.

George, however, relieved our boredom. When he wasn't singing, which he did in a shrill nasal voice, he positively oozed conversation. He was taking his duties as interpreter-handyman very seriously. We were in Persia, he said, and only a Persian could tell us the truth about the country, and he was that Persian. So we started to talk hats. George, of course, had a "Pahlevi". It was made of cardboard, covered with beige-coloured calico and had a shiny black papier-maché brim, and he wore it cockily at the angle which Earl Beatty made so popular during the war. But when it rained, the cardboard sagged and the dye of the papier-maché ran in rivulets down his forehead. It had other uses than as a

head-dress. If George wanted to keep something handy—say his handkerchief or a bit of chocolate or an acid drop—all he did was to take off his hat, pop his treasure inside and then reclamp the lot on his head.

We had noticed on the road any amount of peasants wearing the oddest versions of the "Pahlevi" model. The heads were high-domed felt skull-caps and the peaks were made of anything from paper to cardboard. George explained. Those skull-caps were the traditional headdress of the Persian peasantry; but now that the new Shah had prescribed the "Pahlevi" brim for everyone, all these peasants carried relays of home-made "Helen Wills" visors in their pockets, which they inserted under their skull-caps whenever they visited a town or heard that a policeman was in the offing.

George's patter passed the time beautifully, and after two hours we were half-way to Kasvin and on top of the Arveh Pass, 7500 feet high and among the snow. It was bitterly cold; the sleet froze us to the marrow and the wind cut like a lash. And when we started the descent beyond the summit, our road—still surprisingly well maintained—tied itself in hair-raising knots and gave Roy at the wheel an anxious half-hour until we reached a valley where we lunched gratefully in the shelter of a barn. It was our first meal with George, and he ate his bully beef and pineapple like a man; but, curiously, he refused the tea. Then came George's first wash-up. He bore it manfully, but with obvious distaste, and to let him down gently I helped him to dry the plates. Then we had a lesson in packing the luncheon basket. He liked that far better. Meanwhile Roy was replacing a broken bolt in the spare-wheel attachment, and when he was ready, the sun was shining at last and we were all happy.

For the next hour our road ran on through a fine gorge, buttressed with wild impressive rock formations. We stopped at a place called Aligarm, which means "hot water", where there is a celebrated medicinal spring; and then we were done with mountains, and ahead, stretching far into the north-east, a vast plain; and finally Kasvin, our halting-place for the night. Our road made the usual detour, passing two beautifully tiled gates set in the unbroken mud-brick wall of the town; then the inevitable crossroads and a river to ford; and at last we were in a wide street and George, much in his element, was in charge. He found our hotel easily; he took rooms for us at three shillings a night; he ordered us an excellent tea of brown bread and butter and marrow jam; and then he might have

been the model butler saying good night to the Duke: "Is there anything else your Grace requires?" There wasn't; and we said our first good night to George.

Kasvin is attractive, but its scheme of building is decidedly odd. In the uneuropeanized quarters the streets mostly run on the level of the first floor of the houses, so that every door opens on to a flight of steps leading into a sunken garden. The gardens were gay with spring, and after the rain the young foliage of the poplars seemed almost ethereal, and from the roadway we looked out across a vista of brown flat roof-tops broken by vivid poplar aigrettes quivering in the light twilight breeze.

Our dinner was good, though mysterious. There were two other diners, a European man and wife—either Dutch or German. And the man kept an oblong box, about the size of a portable wireless, strapped to his wrist even while he ate, and one Persian policeman stood at the door and another by the window. When they had finished their dinner and rose to go, a guard of Dogberrys formed up round them outside the dining-room door, escorted them to their room, which was in the same passage as ours, and two remained on guard in the passage and two on the verandah outside the window. They were a mysterious couple; but I have an idea that they had something to do with jewels which were to be sold outside Persia. I wonder for whose benefit. Anyhow, they departed next morning down the Baghdad road long before we were up.

The last stage to Teheran was short and dull. The road was crowded and greasy after more rain, and we made poor progress and were bored; and once I so far forgot myself as to ask George to sing his other tune. Then our lunch was not a great success. We ate it in a poplar grove with the smell of spring in our nostrils and a cuckoo talking of April above our heads; but the fare was sardines, and George, who said he disliked the smell of oil, washed up so badly that I had to send him back to the spring with the dirty plates: and then it began to rain again, and it was still raining when we reached Teheran. We seemed fated to enter or leave every capital under weeping skies. But for all that our arrival was impressive.

We entered by the Kasvin Gate. It is one of twelve gates set in the walls of the capital, and when I saw it I resigned myself more than willingly to an orgy of romance. This was picture-book Persia—the Persia of the miniatures. We drove in under a huge arch with guard-houses on either side; it

was crowned with six minarets, and the whole building was tiled. These Persian tiles must be seen to be believed. The colours are mainly blue—turquoise, saxe, and royal; the Arabic lettering is orange, green, brown and white; and there is nothing heavy either in the design or in the blend of colour. They seem to belong to the country; they would match its every season—the snow of winter, the drought of summer, the fall of the leaf; and, as we saw them in the bloom of spring, they looked absolutely perfect. They even made the rain cheerful.

But as soon as we drew up inside the Gate all romance vanished. We were at once assailed by the Dogberry on duty with his inevitable notebook, and for a quarter of an hour he wrestled with our names and family history. But by this time, like dear old Ella Wheeler Wilcox, we had learned something. "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone." Our smiles were devastating, and we completed our conquest by giving Dogberry our paste-board cards. He went off with a noticeable swagger, and I'm sure with those cards he was made a corporal next day. But George had been most tiresome. He had found a nut-vendor, and to get the smell of the sardine oil out of his nostrils he bought a handful of pistachios, and whenever I particularly wanted him to interpret intelligibly, either his mouth was full or he would spit a shower of shells all over my boots.

Inside the town, New Persia smote us hip and thigh. Teheran has a wonderful system of its own of traffic control. Huge boulevards have been carved through what was originally a straggling Oriental town, and where these boulevards meet, a tin-hatted and white-gloved policeman, standing in a tin pulpit, controls the traffic; and by Persian law oncoming vehicles have to signal their intended direction by klaxon. One hoot means "right"; two hoots "left", three "straight on". The result is pandemonium indescribable, which usually ends in the policeman throwing his white-gloved hands to heaven and signalling everyone on at once and the devil take the hindmost.

However, we survived somehow, collected a lovely heavy mail from the Imperial Bank of Persia, and by tea-time were comfortably settled in a good but expensive hotel just by the British Legation. George left us with obvious relief. He said he had a "cousin" in the town, and I asked no questions.

CHAPTER XXVII

BY AIR TO MESHED

MESHED is the holiest town in Persia—the site of the tomb of the Imam Rıza, who was the eighth of the twelve Imams or prophets revered by the Shiah sect in Islam. Persia is the only Mohamedan country in Islam where the Shiahs predominate over the rival Sunni sect, which comprises North Africa, Arabia, the Levant generally, and Turkey; and since the days of the Sefavi dynasty of Shahs the State religion of Persia has been Shiah. The two chief Shiah shrines are, however, in Iraqi territory at Kerbela and Nejaf, and both are great objects of pious Persian pilgrimage; but next to them in sanctity and attraction comes Meshed, and I felt that, as I had come to Persia, to Meshed I must go.

It lies some five hundred miles east of Teheran, but the road is severe and monotonous, and the journey in the lorry would have taken us the best part of ten days there and back. So, as our time was limited, I had decided to travel by air, which would only take six hours each way and would give me two days in Meshed itself.

The service was one of many which the German Junker Company had organized all over Persia. Prices were moderate, and the record of the company's achievements was quite reassuring; but the Meshed plane was due to leave next morning. So, after a quick tea in our hotel, I tore myself away from my letters and hurried off in a cab to the Junker office. Yes. The 'plane would start at dawn and I could have a seat, but had I got a Government permit to leave Teheran? I had never heard of this formality, but the company couldn't issue a ticket until permission to travel had been obtained. I must go to the police. Feeling certain that, on my own, I would never get a permit this side of Christmas, and greatly regretting that we had allowed George off so early, I tore back to the hotel and enlisted the hall porter, who spoke French, to pilot me through. But the Permit Office was crammed, and

there was a a long queue of Persians lined up ahead of me with their papers. However, the porter was of the country, and with the aid of a few Krans he "financed" me to the top of the queue in less than no time; and there I produced my passport and papers and explained my business. The official looked at me blankly, remarking that I had come to the wrong office; and when the porter argued, all that happened was that the official elaborated his former statement by saying that even if his had been the right office, my papers were not in order. I then bethought me of my letter of introduction from the Persian Legation in London, and back we went to the hotel; and then on again, but to another police station and another queue, and after more "finance" I reached a new official. He inspected all my papers and told me politely that they were quite in order, but that I must go back to the first office, as he was not the issuing authority.

By this time I was beginning to feel just like poor Joe in Tom-All-Alones. I was always being "moved on". So back we went, the same queue, more finance, and the same official, who was furious to see us again and very rude; and I was beginning to feel absolutely desperate, when at last luck came my way. A nice tired-looking young officer walked past me through the room, and to my joy he was talking French to a foreigner. I was after him like a rabbit, followed him to the door of his office, and before he had time to close it behind him, I was inside and bowing like a Mandarin. Considering that I was an arrant gate-crasher, he was surprisingly patient and civil. He listened to what I had to say and read my letter from London, and then he began to act. He rang a bell, and in a minute or two, who should appear but the very official who two minutes before had been so rude to me. Now, before his Persian superior, he was deliciously cringing and sycophantic, and instructions were barked out at him which I presumed were in my favour. My revenge was already very sweet.

But soon I began to feel less confident. My fairy godfather began to question me. Why was I in such a hurry to get to Meshed? What was my job? Was I still in the Army? The last question was repeated three times at intervals, and between question and answer he rang the telephone and spoke to somebody obviously about me. Suddenly I looked on his desk where my passport was lying. It was open at the page containing my 1930 visa to enter Soviet Russia. I felt suddenly suspect. Then there was another spasm of telephoning which

I could not understand, and then, while I sat alongside looking very self-conscious, the officer copied my letter from London with great application, docketed it with the number of my passport, and rang the bell. I felt more nervous than ever. But it was all right. My erstwhile oppressor reappeared and my permit was in his hand. The officer stamped it, smiled, regretted the delay, and we shook hands. I have seldom been more relieved.

And now all was plain sailing for the morning. I went back to Junkers and confirmed my booking, returned to the hotel and packed a few necessities for Meshed, had an enormous dinner with Roy, in the course of which each of us ate twelve kidneys, and so, at last, gratefully to bed.

The next thing I knew was that the hall porter with a lamp in his hand was shouting into my ear that it was five o'clock, and that a cab was waiting for me outside, and that I ought to be away in ten minutes. I dressed in record time, gulped down a dank cup of tea, and almost before I was properly awake, I was rattling through the dark, empty streets on my way to the aerodrome. We reached it just before dawn, and it looked extremely haphazard. The office was a tiny shanty: there were no hangars; and five 'planes were squatting in the open like five frogs beside a pond. I had a horrid spasm of that sinking feeling which used to proceed "zero" hour. It all looked so dangerously amateur. Then things began to happen. First arrived the pilot and the mechanic, but when they introduced themselves I felt worse than ever. To my horror the pilot proved to be Persian and, when I had taken my German ticket I had banked on a German pilot, not a Persian; and I was suddenly and unreasonably obsessed with the idea that he would know as much about an aeroplane as the Persian chauffeur knows about his lorry.

However, I was booked; and, feeling rather like a pig on a moving platform on its inexorable way into the sausage machine, I allowed myself to be guided by the mechanic, who, thank goodness, was German, to the police office, where my permit to travel was stamped; and then, before I knew very much more, I was in the cabin of the 'plane—a solitary pig in his sty—stuffing my ears with cotton-wool to drown the noise of the engine, which was warming up. I looked rather last-longingly at *terra firma*, and then suddenly off we went. I shall not be caught unawares again. I was thinking how smoothly we were flying, when suddenly the wing

opposite the window out of which I was looking, seemed to rise and hit me in the eye ; and with a horrid gasp I slid like a sack across the sty. It was only a steep bank, but it brought my heart and most of my dank morning tea into my mouth.

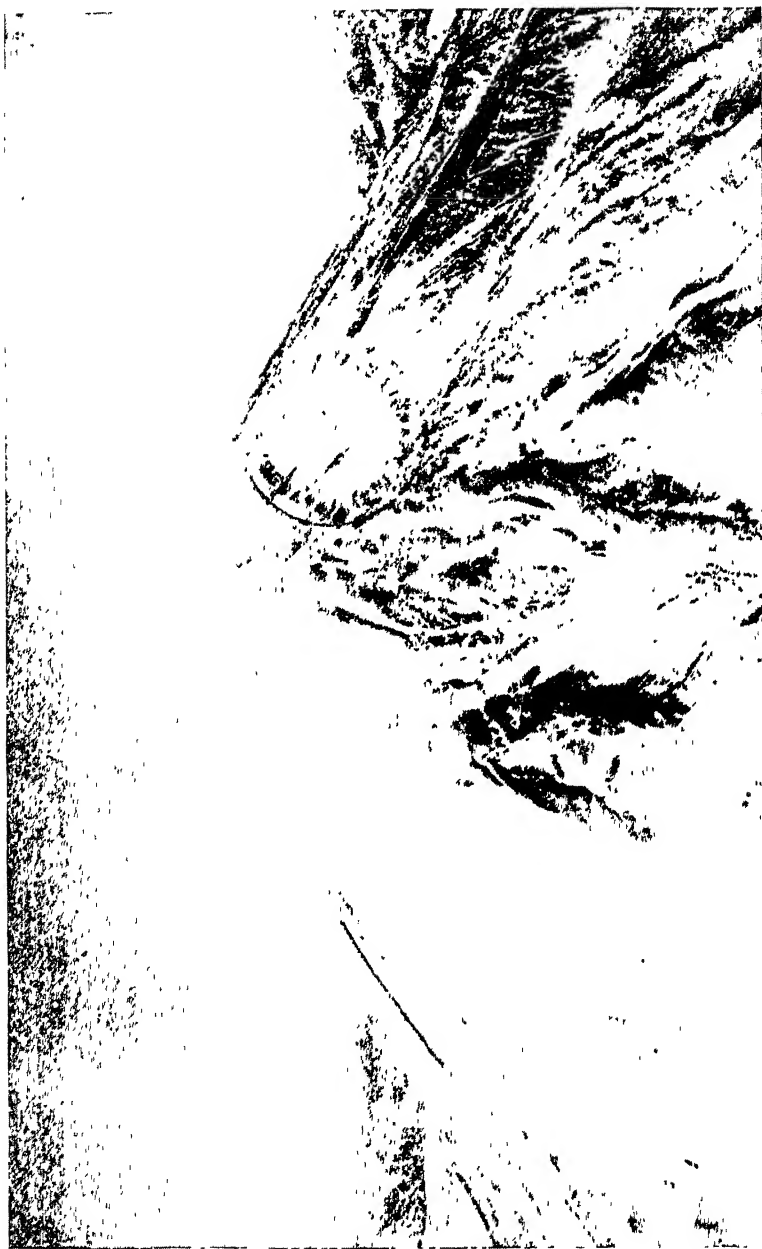
When I had recovered with the aid of a paper-bag marked "*Für Lüftkranke*", we were on an even keel and climbing hard towards a tangled mass of blue-ribbed mountains. But we continued smoothly, and I soon mustered up courage to move my head a little, and, finding that it produced no further unpleasantness, I peered nervously through the window. And then almost suddenly I discovered that I no longer felt ill, and started taking photographs of mountain formations, and villages and roads, and began to enjoy myself very much and to think what fun it was to be in a comfortable windless pig-sty, 6000 feet above fine broken country.

First we flew below the crest of a long razor-backed ridge, zigzagging steadily round its contours ; then we climbed again ; and every now and then there was a perfect view to the north of snow-capped Demavand, the highest mountain in Persia. Then at last, with the sun dead in our eyes, we opened a wide plain and for an hour zoomed over blank pinkish-brown desert, often no more than 300 feet above the ground. It slipped away giddily under us, and I would have greatly preferred to have had another 500 feet between me and ground, which looked an unattractive surface to hit at ninety miles an hour. But by this time I had completely forgotten that the pilot was a Persian, and was enjoying everything and almost apologetic about my first lack of confidence.

There were tracks to watch, weaving mazy patterns below us ; flocks of sheep scattered in clouds of dust as our shadow passed over them ; the mud-villages looked like neat children's toys ; water-runnels traced their courses like silver threads, leaving their trails of green cultivation behind them ; the cisterns shone like bowls of mercury ; and every now and then we would see a motor on a track below us, and five minutes later we would have lost it behind us in the west. For two hours I loved it all, and then, feeling bored and imagining I was hungry, I foolishly ate a very greasy Persian cheese sandwich, and suddenly I felt that I no longer wished to look out of the window. Then it seemed that our passage had suddenly become rather bumpy. Finally I realized that if I did not shut my eyes at once something would happen. Nothing happened. For just as I was beginning to feel



THE FLIGHT TO MESHEH
"WE FLEW BELOW THE CREST OF A LARGE RAZOR-BACK RIDGE."



SNOW-CAPPED DEMAVAND, THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN PERSIA

desperate, we landed. It was half-way, and we were to refuel for the remaining two hundred and fifty miles.

The stop was both welcome and amusing. There was a village about half a mile away from the landing-ground, and when we landed a nonchalant camel came plodding out to meet us, heavily laden with thirty-two gallons of petrol. It was all delightfully casual. And while the mechanic looked after the camel and the petrol, the Persian pilot talked to me. He was the only Persian civil aviator in the country, and had been trained in Berlin, and was the regular pilot for the weekly flight to and from Meshed.

I asked him if it paid. His reply was rather surprising. "Oh yes," he said, "we usually are full—corpses, you know, to be buried at Meshed. As a matter of fact, you are lucky. One was booked for to-day, only it never turned up. It was an Indian Shiah who died a year ago at Karachi; but he must have got mislaid somewhere *en route*." I felt rather green.

By this time the fuelling had been completed and I was ordered once more into the sty, and off we went again climbing bumpily out of the plain and heading towards another towering mountain range; and at once I felt very hot and sick, and, thanking my stars that I was not bedfellow with a corpse, I stretched myself on the floor of the pig-sty and went fast asleep. I woke after an hour feeling very cold. We were again in mountains and climbing hard against a huge range. It was very bumpy, and through a glass panel in front of me I had a view of the dashboard in the pilot's seat, and could see the altimeter climbing and climbing—7500, 8000, 8500, and finally 9000; and then, thank goodness, we were over the top and before us to the east lay Meshed, sprawling right across a wide plain 6000 feet below us.

Then suddenly absolute silence. The pilot had switched off his engine, and through my windows, now on one side, now on the other, as we spiralled down, I had fleeting pictures of the town. It was a typical mud town, charmingly dotted with the green of trees and gardens, but in one respect it was quite different from the villages I had seen during the flight. Illustrated papers occasionally publish fancy maps of Europe showing the different degrees of tariffs in force in different countries by sketching walls of different heights along the various frontiers. The result is a very striking but very artificial picture; and Meshed, seen as I was now seeing it, struck me as equally artificial. Its mud-roof flatness was

scored with great straight avenues flanked with high straight walls, behind which huddled the normality of mud-brick life ; and in the centre of the town, looking like a golden stud in the middle of a brown shirtfront, was the dome of the sacred Shrine surrounded by walls and minarets, and outside them again a wide circular avenue looking like one of the crescents in Bath or Tunbridge Wells. Meshed had very obviously been in the hands of a town-planner with drastic powers.

And then suddenly a frightful spasm attacked me and Meshed was completely forgotten in an orgy of misery. The pilot altogether missed the aerodrome at his first attempt, and up we went again, swishing and banking until I almost screamed. I clutched a new brown-paper bag hotly in my hand and longed with a passionate longing for solid earth beneath my feet. Then I shut my eyes tight, and I kept them shut until we eventually did land. And a very good landing too, and the paper bag was still virgin ; and I staggered out of the sty with a great heart in me. For, as I journalistically reflected, I was a pilgrim to Meshed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MESHED

MY hotel lay in the centre of the town, and as I drove to it I had a view of those wide boldly fronted boulevards which I had seen from the air. From earth and cab level naught could be seen of old mud-brick Meshed which lay behind those imposing walls of shop fronts ; and my first reaction was that a revulsion against an un-Oriental modernization which was mere eyewash. But on second thoughts I reflected that such a criticism was unfair to the Shah. He had made these roads to make old towns better, and, who knows ? his efforts may later filter through his new façades into the mud-brick fastnesses behind, which he does not want the world to see until he has re-edited them.

The hotel was called the "Moderne", and was owned by a Russian, and it entirely belied its name. I was given a bedroom with a toilet attached ; but it had no bed and no washing arrangements, only a small table and two hard chairs. I sat down thankfully on one of them and then started to wrestle with the problem of making the proprietor understand that I was hungry. Luckily "tea" and "biscuits" are Esperanto, and after I had made a noise like a hen they brought me two small eggs, so I ate well. Then I put my coat on the floor and my head on my despatch case and slept soundly. Meshed had not started too badly.

As the day progressed, things got better and better. Later in the afternoon the charming representative of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company rescued me from the "Moderne" and I enjoyed, more than I can say, the hospitality of himself and his wife in their jolly little house outside the town ; and for tea I went to the British Agency, where again there was perfect hospitality and an atmosphere which was most refreshingly British. I had been told in Teheran that the Agency garden was the most beautiful in all Korasan ; and I was not disappointed. It is a large walled compound, and I entered

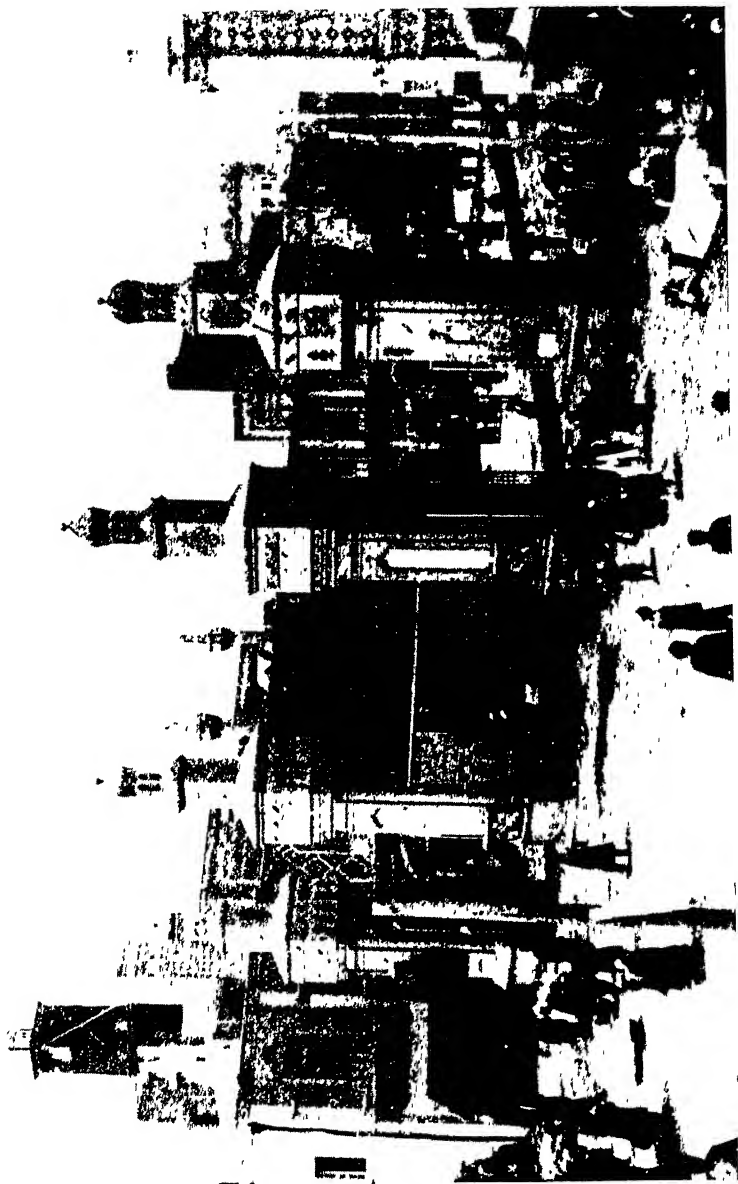
through an imposing gate into a garden which was perfect England in Persia. High trees and the wind in them; ivy growing high and thick along the walls; stout privet hedges; green lawns; and a stillness broken only by the whistling of mating birds. It was quite lovely.

Next day I saw the rest of the town thoroughly and most congenially under the care of a confident young Persian whose home was in Teheran. He spoke of Meshed rather as a Londoner will speak of Newcastle. "Life is terribly provincial here," he said, "and after Teheran I miss real society intensely. Of course it might be worse; and ten years ago, before Shah Riza embarked on his town-planning, the town was absolutely primitive. There wasn't a street that ran straight for more than twenty yards on end, and not more than half a dozen could cope with a motor. To-day, anyhow, we can get about, and you see how fine and wide these new boulevards are. Some of the townsfolk do say that they are so wide that their donkeys can no longer find their own way home. But, of course, Meshed is very conservative and backward. One day all the Persian provinces will be as grateful to the Shah for what he is doing, as Teheran already is. It is all in the right direction. When he came to the throne, he at once gave orders to all municipalities that they must have better and more convenient roads, and with his prestige behind them, the local councils went bald-headed at the job. Here their great idea was to make the Shrine of the Imam Riza the visible as well as the actual centre of the town. And they are doing it—thanks to the Shah's power. Before him no one would have dared to be so drastic, especially in Meshed, which is our holiest Shiah city in Persia. For until Shah Riza put the Mullahs in their place they were all-powerful in politics as well as in religion, and they were absolute rulers here."

We were walking up the great boulevard which leads to the principal gate of the precincts which surround the Shrine. The gate is quite perfect, and a masterpiece of architecture with its graceful arch and above it an almost Chinese minaret, all tiled with blues and greens and yellows in perfect blend. The precincts themselves are enclosed in a walled square, and in each of the walls are set fine triple gates past which no unbeliever may tread. But though I could not enter, I could see the life beyond. Within that holy quadrilateral there was nothing of what we would term in the West a cathedral atmosphere. It was full of shops and cafés and



MESHED THE SHRINE OF THE IMAM RIZA
THE GREAT GATE



PERSIA MESSED THE SACRED PRECINCTS
THE IMAM'S TOMB LIES BENEATH THE GOLDEN DOME IN THE BACKGROUND

offices ; people circulated about their daily business ; children played ; and life was absolutely normal. From each of the four gates a wide piazza leads up to the mosque itself, and dominating the whole scene is the golden dome above the tomb of the Prophet, gleaming magnificently over its under-structure of vivid peacock-blue tiling.

There has been no apparent modernizing within the holy precincts, but all round there is a different story. In other days the surroundings of the Shrine were an untidy wilderness of Moslem graveyards. To-day we walked comfortably round the half-completed circus which will eventually embrace the whole area. From the air it had reminded me of Bath or Tunbridge Wells, but beyond the finished section the house-breaker was cheerfully at work, and I might have been walking from the Ritz when Piccadilly was "up". We made our way through heaps of rubble and stone, and everywhere the destruction had been ruthless. I noticed particularly the remains of what had been the most popular bath in the town. The domes of the tepidarium had disappeared, and we looked down into a cellar which had still to be cleared. On its walls still survived a row of frescoes painted to delight the eye of the perspiring males of Meshed. I was glad to think that those pictures were doomed. They were frightful. The panels had been painted with terrible fashion-plates of "gentlemen" in long black frock-coats, choker collars and flamboyant ties, and side by side with them were wasp-waisted "ladies" dressed in the fashions of the 'eighties, with leg-of-mutton sleeves, sweeping skirts and mountains of hair tightly dressed over haystacks of pads. My friend thought it was a thousand pities that such beauty had to be destroyed.

But though he agreed in principle with the Shah's reforms, he was less enthusiastic about the details of their execution. "Thank goodness I had not property which lay in the line of the new town-planning," he said. "Those who were in this unfortunate position, have had a terrible time. One day they would receive an order from the Government that the house-breakers would be coming in a week to shave off their sitting-room and best bedroom ; and when they asked for compensation for the whole house, they were told that, as only the best bedroom and the sitting-room were involved, compensation would be limited accordingly and at a fixed rate of so much per square yard. But when they asked for the money down, as they would now have to build a new house, they were told that it would only be paid in

instalments, the first being due when the housebreaker arrived and destroyed. But when, after eviction, the owners asked for this first instalment, they were told that as patriots, and as Persia was very poor, they must accept half of what had been promised. Nor was that all. Many are still waiting for the further instalments and are still without homes."

Nevertheless, he was very proud of New Persia. "It is quite right," he said, "that Persia should be brought up to date, and take its proper place in the world. At the same time, some of these modernizing reforms are overdone. The women are getting quite out of hand. Many can now read and are being educated, which is a very bad thing. They were far better as they were. Look!" And he pointed at a cab in which were three ladies most decently shrouded from view and doing no harm to anyone. "Those women," he went on, "now dare to drive alone in public. Ten years ago, that would have been quite impossible. But I gather that the Shah himself is getting rather nervous that he has gone too far in women's emancipation. For about a year ago he issued an order to the army that, although officers might ride in cabs with their wives, it must be with their wives only. And when the Shah gives an order, he sees that it is carried out. The other day in Teheran he saw a young lieutenant driving with a woman, and at once called on the cab to stop and tackled the officer. 'Who is this woman?' he said. 'My wife,' said the lieutenant. The Shah gave him a terrible look. 'I don't believe you.' And he turned on the girl. 'Are you his wife?' 'No,' she stammered. Whereupon the Shah jumped out of his car, seized the officer by the scruff of his neck, threw him on the roadway and kicked him all the way into the gutter.

I burst out laughing, but my friend quickly corrected me. "If we had had more Riza Khans on the throne in the past," he said, "Persia would be a far better and a far richer place to-day. Did not the Kajars sell our oil to the British?" At that time I knew nothing of the oil question, and did not wish to be involved. So I smiled blankly and changed the subject.

The end of our expedition brought us past a large square on the outskirts of the town where a municipal theatre is being built. The square used to be the public hanging-place, and my friend told me that only five years before there had been an orgy of political hanging in the town. The occasion had been celebrated with tremendous thoroughness. Before the day of the executions the newspapers announced the

time and the place, and similar notices were posted in all the main streets ; and when the day arrived, all Meshed turned out for the spectacle, and it lasted for the best part of a day—for each victim had to be hauled off the ground by a rope, and some took twenty minutes to die.

My visit to Meshed coincided by chance with the opening of the feast of Moharrem, which lasts ten days, and the place was full of wild-looking pilgrims from the four corners of Persia and even from Turkestan and Afghanistan. And as I walked the streets I felt uncomfortably conspicuous in my European hat, and was well aware of black scowls from under beetling brows. I described my feelings to my friend, but he only laughed. "Oh, you are quite safe these days," he said, "Real fanaticism is now dead, and the ten days of our feast are now quite mild. There will, of course, be processions to the Shrine, and all will carry in their hands chains to the end of which will be fastened a knob of nails and bits of sharp iron ; and as they walk they will swing the chains over their shoulders and, of course, cut their backs to ribbons. But until quite recently there used to be far worse doings. Then the real zealots used to form themselves in groups of a dozen or so, and sing and dance, and when they had worked themselves into a proper frenzy they would draw their swords and slash their heads. Of course many committed suicide. But that, they thought, was all to the good. They went straight to Paradise. However, all that has now been stopped. It was degrading and unworthy of New Persia."

I never felt really at home in Meshed. But the fanaticism of Moharrem was not the only cause of my *malaise*. Everywhere in the town there were signs of the Russian within the gate. The shop-signs were Russian ; cinema captions were in Russian ; and in the main streets every second man seemed to wear a Russian blouse. In fact, outwardly the town seemed quite as Russian as it was Persian. Meshed lies inconveniently close to the Russian frontier, and Russian strategic railways have been built right up to the boundary, and in other days Meshed, like Tabriz in the North-West, was a sort of Tom-Tiddler's Ground between the two nations. To-day, however, Russian strategy is conducted on economic rather than military lines ; for after the war the Soviets publicly repudiated the Tsarist policy of interference in Persia. But to take its place Moscow has evolved new and very subtle theories for the economic penetration of the country. One specific instance merits description. The vast Russian oilfields

in the convenient Caucasus can and do export enormous amounts of petrol into Northern Persia at prices which leave them with a profit of about 60 per cent. The Persians pay in Persian currency, which the Russians do not want; so with the money they corner some particular class of Persian rug which enjoys special favour in London and New York and pay the carpet-makers 20 per cent. above normal rates. This transaction drives the regular Persian exporter out of the market, but leaves the Russians still with 40 per cent. of their petrol profits. They then export the whole stock of rugs to London and New York, where they undersell the genuine trader by another 10 per cent., which leaves them with 30 per cent. out of their original profits. But this 30 per cent. is now, not in Persian currency, but in good sterling and dollars, with which they can buy machinery and other incidentals for their Five Year Plan. Once again Persia is a helpless pawn in Russian policy. For these economic jugglings are extremely hard to defeat.

But in so far as the military safety of Meshed is concerned, the Shah is perfectly well aware of the presence of the enemy within the gate and is taking no risks. For, although he and his advisers do inspire themselves in many directions from Soviet practices, Russia is still, as it has always been, the traditional enemy of Persia.

My first morning in Meshed I was wakened by a loud military fanfare coming from the barracks near by. It was followed by a jiggledy-jig tune and then by loud mob-like cheering. It was the first parade of the Meshed garrison. Every morning and evening the troops parade. They are called to attention by the bugle; then the national anthem—the jiggledy-jig tune—is played; and finally the commanding officer calls for three cheers for the Sovereign and for the Pahlevi dynasty. It is patriotism by numbers. But the ceremony is heard all over Meshed and by Russians as well as Persians; and its message is the same to all. Gone are the days in Persia when “there were no kings in the land and every man did that which was right in his own eyes”.

Compared with the soldiers we had met on the way to Teheran, the Meshed garrison was smart and well turned out. The men had good uniforms, though their boots left a good deal to be desired; they were shaved; and when marching in column they kept good time and stepped out with a curiously deliberate stride, swinging their arms like Guardee recruits. The officers were also smart. They wore abnormally long

tunics, and carried sweeping scimitar swords with the point turned to the front, which seemed most inconvenient. Altogether the Meshed garrison was outwardly quite as debonair as its Iraqi counterpart in Baghdad.

But, leaving Russia and fanaticism on one side, I suffered yet a third type of *malaise* in Meshed. The town is most uncomfortable climatically. My friend told me that every visitor to Meshed ought to bring with him three weights of clothing, for, for some reason which he could not explain, there are actually belts of different temperatures in the town. I have no explanation either ; but I do know that during my stay I was always either too hot or too cold, and I did see within a quarter of an hour men wearing enormous fur coats and looking cold, and others wearing calico nightgowns and looking impossibly hot.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEW PERSIA AND ITS SHAH

THE return flight to Teheran was an ordeal. There was a dawn-mist low on the hills to the west of Meshed, and we had two false starts. Both times we got lost in cloud, and after two terrifying half-hours dodging like a woodcock among some of the nastiest mountains I have ever seen—and we only saw them when we were almost into them—we returned to Meshed aerodrome to wait for the mist to lift. I had hated our two abortive flights, and I hated the ensuing wait. But not half so intensely as did my solitary companion in the pig-sty. He was a Persian, had never flown before, and had already been extremely ill—so ill, indeed, that if I had been in his place I don't know that I wouldn't have cut my losses and gone to Teheran by road. He didn't, and I admired him more than I can say.

But this time he took every precaution. Before we restarted, he got out a blanket, wound it all round his body, took another paper bag off the hook on the wall, and lay down full length on the floor. The last I saw of him were his two eyes, looking like a calf's eyes just before it becomes veal; then he drew the blanket right over his head and for most of the rest of the journey lay like ~~one~~ dead. So he did not witness the success of our third start. This time our Persian pilot towered like a falcon, and at 9000 feet we were in bright sunshine above a cottonwool sea of cloud, and then at last the air lay open to Teheran 500 miles to the east.

When we arrived, we were four hours overdue, and to me it was a welcome home-coming. I had had quite enough of flying, and there was Roy and the lorry and George—miraculously shaved (Was it his "cousin"?)—and they gave me a grand welcome. But to my surprise all the luggage which I had left in the hotel was packed on the lorry. While I had been away a new diplomat had arrived in Teheran, and the hotel people had given him my room. I

hadn't paid to reserve it while I was away, so they were within their rights. All the same, I did feel sore—the soreness of eviction. But in the end it was all for the best. In my absence Roy had discovered a newly opened *pension* in a fine house which had been the Dutch Legation. It was kept by a Russian ex-artillery officer of the Tsarist régime; his wife was the manageress; the cook was a *ci-devant* Russian aristocrat and still looked every inch a duchess; and we both had good rooms, and the prices were about one-third of those of the hotel. True, there was a happy-go-lucky lack of outfit, and our tooth-mugs were regularly collected to be used at meals; but there was an atmosphere of rather pathetic goodwill, and we both were quickly at home.

The place was quite full, and at dinner we made our bow to our fellow boarders. There was a long table, and at one end sat a group of Englishmen engaged in local business, and at the other a cosmopolitan world comprising a Baghdadi Jew and a luxuriant wife—both very noisy eaters—a slick young Persian who spoke loud English with a repulsive cockney accent, and a dear old Russian lady who said nothing and, we understood, gave lessons in French when she was not the housemaid of the establishment. For some reason or other Roy and I were placed in the cosmopolitan zone, and during the meal no one spoke to us at all. But after dinner we invaded the other end of the table and heard what England in Persia thought about this land of their exile. I enquired about the despatch of some telegrams which I wanted to send to England, and they all laughed loudly. Since the Persians took over the telegraph service from the Anglo-Indian control the despatch of telegrams had become rather chancy. One of them had recently sent a telegram to France on a Saturday, and had been given a duly stamped receipt. On the Monday, however, he received a telephone message from the Post Office saying that the rates of exchange had altered over the week-end and that he would have to pay the extra. He replied, reasonably, that he had their receipt for a telegram sent on the Saturday, before the rates had risen, and that so far as he was concerned the matter ended there. The reply was shattering. "Then your telegram won't go." It had been lying on the clerk's desk for two days.

But even before Persian control the telegraph system had had a good deal to cope with. Most Persians are keen rifle-shots, and before Shah Riza introduced discipline into the Persian mentality, the most popular form of rifle practice

was connected with the glass insulators on the telegraph poles ; and it had been no uncommon occurrence for a party to go out for a day's shooting—one team against another—and to move down a row of telegraph posts until there were no more targets, i.e. insulators.

It is not easy to attempt as a passing traveller to describe the Persian outlook on life, especially at the present time, when the country is obviously in a state of half-baked transition. It cannot, however, be very wide of the mark to say, as a generality, that the new régime, with its rather showy exterior, has certainly not diminished the conceit for which Persians have been notorious all through history. This conceit derives mainly from the fact that Persia has enjoyed almost uninterrupted independence for centuries. It is true that the country has been invaded again and again, but always the invader has come and looted and gone. And the reason is that it has been worth the while of none to remain. For Persia is three-quarters arid desert and sterile mountain, and can never be rich. And thus Persian independence has survived in spite of, rather than because of, the Persians themselves.

Latterly under the new régime a certain insolence has been added to their conceit. The new Shah has recast the State in an ultra-modern mould, and the novelty of his reforms has bred in young Persia a belief that the country has suddenly become a model which all the rest of the world would do well to, and probably will, follow. And there is no doubt that the Anglo-Persian exhibition in London greatly encouraged this feeling, which now almost amounts to a superiority complex *vis-à-vis* the whole world. There had been official banquets and receptions in London at which some Englishmen who might have known better, and others who knew nothing at all, indulged in a series of fulsome remarks regarding Persian life, Persian emancipation, and Persian culture. Never once while I was in Persia did the topic of the Exhibition provoke any signs of Persian interest in Persian art. Always I would have to listen to endless quotations from these dreary speeches to show me that in the eyes of the world Persia was now one of the great Powers.

If I had never been to Persia, I might well have been equally dashing in romantic eulogy ; for to me, until I visited the country, Persia was the land of Omar Khayyam and of Liza Lehmann's "Persian Garden". I quickly had some shocks.

My first shock had been over Persian dress. I knew that

Persia was being modernized, but I had hoped that somewhere, somehow, I would see picturesque clothing, such as is still to be found in Arab countries. I was bitterly disappointed. All I saw was the grotesque "Pahlevi" hat and the official short coat and European trousers, while the Persian ladies—naturally I did not see them in their Moslem homes—were so shapelessly shrouded that in the end I altogether gave up speculating about possible hidden charms.

Then the country. Omar Khayyam and Liza Lehmann are jointly responsible for this disillusion. I expected a beautiful romantic country—lilac, soft moonlight, and nightingales; instead I found, in the north, bleak steppe-like landscapes, dank and windswept; and in the south, arid scorching deserts where life could never be anything but squalid. Indeed, both of us soon realized that the great towns were, in fact, oases in a land of utter sterility.

And so I come to the Persian cat. It was the greatest disillusion of all. To me Persian cats had always been long-haired, smoke-blue aristocrats. But those aristocrats of the London cat shows, I now know, have not a drop of Persian cat-blood in them. There are millions of cats in Persia; every caravanserai we sampled yowled with them; but the cats we saw were just ordinary cats and very unpleasant ones at that.

Finally Omar Khayyam himself. What we read is only the lyrical side of his muse, and of that only what Edward Fitzgerald found most readily adaptable to his quatrains. Omar Khayyam was a great poet, but he was also a great satirist, and the chief butt of his satire was the hypocrisy and evil living of the Persians of his day, particularly in their neglect of the precepts of Islam. Little of this comes out in Fitzgerald's translations, but naturally the Persians know all about it; and since much of what rang true in Omar's time still rings true to-day, most Persians, though they still vaunt his reputation as a national poet, enjoy his poems far less than we in England enjoy Fitzgerald's beautiful expurgated translations.

Naturally these disillusiones were the result of my own ignorance, and, of course, New Persia is in no way responsible for them. At the same time a Persian returning to-day after ten years' exile would certainly have quite as many shocks as I had experienced, although of quite a different nature. For since Shah Riza came to the throne Persian life has been changed to the core—and for the better. He found an Augean stable of corruption and inefficiency where public contracts

barracks and found the commanding officer in his orderly room. The Colonel rose to his feet in terror, but the Shah paid absolutely no heed. He looked round the office, fingering everything, but saying nothing. Suddenly he turned on the quaking officer. "Your windows are filthy," he said; "and if your windows are dirty, your men will be dirty too." And with the hilt of his sword he broke every window in the place, and the officer had to pay for the new glass.

On another occasion he was reviewing some troops, and his Chief of Staff, a very fat man, had to accompany his royal master on horseback. The inspection took longer than was anticipated, and, as it was getting late, the Shah broke into a trot to get round quicker. Whereupon the Chief of the Staff fell off his horse, and he was so fat that he could not mount again. After the parade the Shah sent for him to the palace; but no sooner did the wretched man appear in his study than he let loose at him a volley of the most frightful language. Finally he picked up a handy chair, launched it straight at the General, hit him full in the middle, and sent him flying backwards through the door.

Such stories doubtless gain much in the telling, and they are told in every coffee-shop in Teheran, and gradually in the minds of his subjects they have earned for Shah Riza the reputation of being that most envied of all beings—a "Card". He is, indeed, in his dealings with his own people the Haroun-el-Rashid of twentieth-century Persia.

CHAPTER XXX

SHAH RIZA AND FINANCE

IN the field of Persian finance Shah Riza has not repeated his administrative successes; for, although his reforms have improved the financial machinery of the country, and taxes are more fairly assessed and are collected with less corruption, he has not, as he had hoped, put Persia on the road to prosperity. But from the outset he has been handicapped in three directions. He inherited from his Kajar predecessor a complete chaos which not even an American financial mission had been able to reduce to any form of order. Secondly, Persia, like the rest of the world, has experienced the full blast of the general depression. Lastly, he and his advisers knew nothing of conditions outside Persia, and had no experience of any kind of national, to say nothing of international, finance; and in their inexperience they imagined that Persian legislation could remedy evils which originated, not in Persia, but in the world at large.

This misplaced confidence was originally a Turkish germ. One of Shah Riza's first acts was to raise the question of the abolition of the capitulations which gave foreigners resident in Persia certain extra-territorial rights and privileges. At the outset everything was normal, and he opened correct diplomatic negotiations with the Powers concerned. They were naturally protracted and tedious, and suddenly Shah Riza broke them off abruptly; and, taking a leaf out of the notebook of Mustafa Kemal, who had done the same thing two years previously in New Turkey, he abolished the capitulations with a stroke of his Persian pen. It was a *tour de force*, and it succeeded; and this, unhappily, encouraged him to think that his other problems would be equally susceptible to drastic action. But world conditions cannot be altered by a stroke of a Persian pen.

His two main problems were the questions of currency and the adverse trade balance. Persian currency, which is on

a silver basis, has depreciated enormously with the fall in the price of metal, and when Shah Riza realized this he took up his pen and wrote. His decrees—there have been many—proclaimed arbitrary official rates of exchange applicable under penalty in Persia. In commenting on the fatuity of this legislation, I need only add that when I was in the country the official rate of exchange for the £1 sterling was 90 Krans, but that everybody and anybody could and did get the world rate of 120 in the bazaars. Shah Riza was pathetically like King Canute trying to control the rising tide from his throne.

Far more important, however, has been his legislation to attempt to correct the adverse trade balance. He was inspired to action mainly owing to the chaos into which unrestricted Russian dumping had plunged all genuine trade in Northern Persia. To combat this, his new legislation decreed that all imports must be licensed by Government, and that licences would only be given to those importers who undertook to export Persian goods to an equivalent value. This ingenious solution might possibly have succeeded in a country which had something to export. But Persia has next to nothing other than carpets, and the story I had heard in Meshed, of Russian strategy "within the law", indicated that here again the Russians had been too smart for Persia. The general result has been that not only are import restrictions reducing the Customs revenue greatly, but they are also starving the country of essential goods which it cannot produce itself, because importers generally refuse to take the risk of entering the few unfamiliar and dangerous trades which do exist in Persia.

When I was in Teheran I met a much-harassed garage-proprietor. "By all means stop the import of superfluous motors," he said; "but to stop the import of spares unless we, the importers, agree to export carpets, of which we know nothing, is sheer madness. Persia has no railways, and its transport must be lorry-borne, and, with Persian chauffeurs as they are, every lorry inevitably spends half its time in dock. And yet not a spare part can we get, unless, of course, we become carpet merchants. Do you know that to-day half the lorries in the country are laid up waiting for spare parts? And that is not all. Most lorry-owners have bought on the hire-purchase system. Well, if trade is bad and they can't pay the next instalment, all they do is to drop a bolt into the gear-box or differential and smash them. Then they have the

lorry hauled into our garage, explain the damage, ask for a spare part which everyone knows we have not got, and then, politely of course, regret that they cannot pay more instalments until we get the lorry fit for the road again."

Nor does the private individual escape the ludicrous inconveniences of this legislation. A friend of mine was sent a muffler by his grandmother as a Christmas present, and in due course was informed by the Persian Customs of the safe arrival of the package. They valued the contents at 7s. 6d. and stated that he could take delivery as soon as he produced a receipt for the purchase of Persian goods to an equivalent value; and as my friend did not want to disappoint his old grandmother, he had to go to the bazaars and buy an unwanted carpet.

This "Buy Persian" campaign is vigorously championed by the Shah himself. Not long ago, when he was leaving his palace, he saw a flashily dressed young Persian on the pavement. He went up to the young man. "My boot is hurting," he said; "please pull it off for me." The young man obeyed, whereupon the Shah, pointing to his own socks, asked where the youth had bought his. He mumbled something about a shop. "Yes," shouted His Majesty, "I know—a French or a German or an American or an English shop! My socks are Persian and it's high time you realized that what is good enough for me is good enough for you! You are a rotten Persian, and it's people like you who are the ruin of my country!" With that he picked up his boot and slammed the youth heartily on the head.

I have already mentioned the extraordinary insignificance of the Persian Prime Minister—he is little more than a man of straw; but until he was summarily removed from public life by sudden order of Riza Khan, there was one man in Persia who had real power beside the Shah. He was called the Court Minister—an office which has no parallel in this country—and his name was Teymourache. By birth half Persian, half Russian; by education wholly Russian, he was a tense student of Soviet practices and tactics and in this respect very typical of the younger Persian generations in the towns. For, despite Persia's traditional fear of the Russian menace which no number of Soviet official utterances will dispel, New Persia has been definitely impressed by Soviet dare-devilry—debt-repudiations, the cancellation of the Lena Goldfields concession and the like; and there is no disguising the fact that the outlook of the Russian Press, which circulates freely

in Persia and describes the great Western Powers and Great Britain in particular as self-seeking Capitalists, has found an echo in Persian newspapers and even in official circles ; while wireless and the closer news contact with the world at large have subtly fostered this feeling. The result is that to-day every café in Teheran is familiar with "Capitalism" and "Imperialism", and New Persia has come to believe that the misfortunes of the country are due either to the weakness and corruption of former rulers, or to the exploitation of Persian resources by monied foreigners. In fact, my brief acquaintance with the local Press of Teheran revealed to me the slogan of New Persia : "Liberation from the foreign yoke".

To-day this slogan justifies any flight of provocative anti-foreign fancy Just before my arrival in Teheran a Persian Army contingent had been rather roughly handled by some brigands on the frontier. The comments of the Teheran newspapers were edifying. All affirmed that the rebels were armed with British rifles, and one even suggested that the ubiquitous Colonel Lawrence had joined forces with the brigand chief.

This articulate agitation towards "freedom from the foreigner" is a growth of the last five years. It found its earliest and mildest expression in two purely Persian actions—one abolishing the Anglo-Indian control of the Persian telegraphs, the other cancelling the monopoly of the Imperial Bank of Persia, which is a British foundation, to issue the note currency of the country. Both these *démarches* were eloquent of growing nationalism, but in neither case was there anything unduly arbitrary in the procedure followed. The staff of the Anglo-Indian telegraph organization was dismissed with compensation, and the Government paid £200,000 to the Imperial Bank in return for its surrender of its note monopoly.

A year later Persia—by this time Newer than ever—found itself again in negotiation with the outside world. This time the topic was international air routes to the Far East. The two foreign parties concerned were our Imperial Airways and the Dutch air-line to Java and Sumatra. Their original route, by agreement with the Persian Government, had been laid down along the eastern and Persian shore of the Gulf ; but when the time came for a renewal of the leases of the aerodromes Shah Riza informed the two companies that if they wished to fly over Persia they must do so along a route of his choice by way of Hamadan and Isfahan to Quetta which would be of service to Persia. Both physically and financially such a proposition was quite out of the question,

but the Shah was adamant, with the result that Persia has lost the rent of her aerodromes on the Gulf, as the route now avoids Persian territory without any serious inconvenience.

Finally the question of the Anglo-Persian oil concession has come to a head. The only really stable item in Persia's precarious budget during the last ten years has been the royalties from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Nevertheless, latterly, when the returns have been good, the Persians have said that they ought to be better, and when they were not so good, then the Persians have said that they were being defrauded. Indeed, year in, year out, *the* topic of Teheran conversation has been the so-called iniquitous terms of the concession, and when I was in the country I was tackled on every occasion with the argument that it was unfair that the profits from the oil, which belonged to Persia, should not in their great entirety go to Persia. "How would you like it if your English coal-mines were run by foreigners who took all your profits?" And my argument, that Englishmen had been happily able to develop their own resources without foreign help or finance, always fell on stony ground. It was useless to say that Persians themselves would never have developed the oil, and that the British Company had made an Anglo-Persian something out of a Persian nothing. Always the reply would be the same as the comments of my friend in Meshed: "We Persians could easily have started our own oilfields if we had had proper rules; but before Riza Khan they were all robbers and allowed themselves to be bluffed into selling what is a Persian birthright."

When I was in Teheran there was talk—no more—of the cancellation of the concession. Later it was summarily cancelled by Persian unilateral action, but now the original concession has been somewhat modified in Persia's favour after protracted negotiations which, however—thanks mainly to Teymourache's timely removal—were conducted in a pleasantly healthy spirit of accommodation and understanding on both sides. The new agreement is a happy outcome of what was at one time a very strained situation; and though at first it looked as though Persia was intent on strangling the goose which laid its golden eggs, there is no reason now why the bird should not go on laying happily till 1960.

CHAPTER XXXI

TEHERAN AND THE RUINS OF RHEY

FROM a sightseer's standpoint Teheran is disappointing. The modern part of the town is not unlike a French *ville de province*, and some of the larger streets with their walled gardens and elaborate villas, many of which are foreign embassies and legations, have a remote and amateur air of the Champs Élysées, while the architecture of the Government centre of the capital is in almost slavish imitation of the ornate pretentiousness of the "Petit Palais". With one exception only. The new offices of the Imperial Bank of Persia are definitely and most successfully Persian in conception, and are a real addition to the beauty of the town. The House of Parliament—the Mejlis—likewise was ornate in an undistinguished way, and really, apart from the gates of the town, what we saw of New Teheran was merely pretty and never interesting.

The old Oriental part of the capital lies south-east of the Europeanized quarters, and it, too, is rapidly being modernized into monotony. Only the bazaars, which, like all Eastern bazaars, would defy the ingenuity of any town-planner, have still the *cachet* of the picturesque days which are gone. They stretch for miles, one long arched alleyway after another, and where they intersect there is a dome beautifully ornamented with honeycomb tracery, and under it, making what the French call a *rond-point*, an ornamental pool of water, as often as not tiled in turquoise blue. The atmosphere is still absolutely Oriental—the noises, the smells, and the ebb and flow of rather hot humanity in very cramped spaces. Camels and donkeys, dawdling street-vendors and racing messengers, heavily laden porters and busy shoppers, push and jostle and hurry and dally, and all—man and beast—perspire and pant. Teheran markets are good fun.

But Teheran shocked me deeply in one respect. Its drinking water supply is really terrifying. It runs alongside those

smart new boulevards in gaping unprotected gutters ; when it rains, its flow is swollen by the carry-off from the roadway, sweetened with all and every type of road-sweepings, while its vulnerability to all forms of public pollution, human and animal, of which the least nauseating is the washing of the household linen, would make the Commission of International Hygiene, if there is such a body in the League of Nations, take the first aeroplane to Persia. How epidemics are avoided, goodness knows. Perhaps Teherani familiarity with germs which would totally destroy the stranger, has bred contempt.

Happily we were spared the ordeal of drinking this gutter water. The British Legation is unique in the town in that it has water laid on by pipe from a pure source high in the hills to the north, and our Russian host was on the subscribers' list of the Legation's clientele. They sell the water at so much a gallon, and every morning from the window of my bedroom I used to see a smart barrelled watercart, gaily painted in green and red and drawn by a war-warrior of an Indian mule, come into our garden, where the cook, the *ci-devant* aristocrat, would be waiting with her empty petrol tins.

All the time we were in Teheran we made only one really good expedition. It was to Rhey, or, as it is known in the book of Tobit and in ancient history, Rhages. Rhey lies some five miles south of the capital along the road to Isfahan, and on our way out we had the fun of racing and beating Persia's "Puffing Billy". Until the accession of Shah Riza the only railway in Persia was Puffing Billy's narrow-gauge track between Teheran to Shah Abdul Azim, five miles away. The service is antediluvian, but very popular ; and it pays, which is more than can be said for highly modern railways which have been built in the last decade.

Shah Riza dreamed of an all-Persian line from the Caspian to the Gulf, and at great cost two sections—one in the extreme north (of which more anon), the other in the extreme south, from the area of the Anglo-Persian oilfields to the sea—have been completed. The northern section was built by German enterprise, and when or if funds are ever available it is to be continued to Teheran and Hamadan, and later southwards through the Bakhtiari mountains to join with the southern section, which was built by an Anglo-American syndicate. But the Bakhtiari country is an appalling problem for any engineer, and the construction of a through railway would cost far more money than Persia is likely to have at her disposal for years. The original estimate for the building of

the whole of this all-Persia line was in the neighbourhood of £40,000,000, a formidable and slightly incautious liability for a Government whose average annual budget only amounts to £8,000,000 ; and it is a thousand pities that since I left Persia the Junker aeroplane service, which was so well organized and so useful in a difficult country like Persia, should have failed owing to lack of public support and inadequate Government subsidy. In my humble opinion the Persian Government would have been far better advised to have financed the development of air traffic, which does work, than to have sanctioned the crushing capital expenditure required for this all-Persia system which may never be completed and which will, anyhow, not work for years and years.

Just short of Rhey we passed the beautiful Mosque of Shah Abdul Azim. It is one of the many sanctuaries in the country where the miscreant may take "bast", which renders him immune from arrest for as long as he keeps within its precincts ; and with its towering golden dome, which can be seen for miles across the vast plain, it must be a most convenient refuge for the hard-pressed malefactor fleeing from justice—or injustice—in Teheran. Here in 1896 Shah Nasruddin—the Shah of Lord Curzon's Persia—was assassinated. I wish our George had been with us to talk about Nasruddin. He could have told us much which would have saved us a great embarrassment three weeks later. And with this cryptic remark, which will be explained later in this book, we move on to Rhey and back into antiquity.

Rhey is possibly the oldest city in the world. According to legend, it was founded by the Patriarch Seth ; and it also figures in the accounts of the wanderings of the Aryans. Then it became a great city, boasting a population of 1,000,000 in the days of the grandeur of Babylon and Nineveh ; and it was during this epoch that my friend Tobias visited the town to collect from Galaël the ten talents belonging to his father Tobit. Its history then becomes more definite. Darius mentions the place in the tablets of Bisitun ; Alexander, during his Persian campaign, passed that way ; later it was rebuilt by one of the Seleucids ; and subsequently it became the capital of the Parthian Empire. Then, eight centuries later, it was engulfed in the Arab conquest. But once again it survived with even enhanced importance. Arab writers called it "the First of Cities, the Spouse of the World, and the Market of the Universe", and if the statistics of those times are to be believed, at one time it boasted a Persian-Arab population of

8,000,396 persons—no more, no less. It was also the birth-place of Haroun-el-Rashid. For some three centuries it maintained its position, and then arrived Jenghis Khan and Timur and the place was sacked with appalling massacre by the Tartars. However, it continued to survive, though in reduced circumstances, as a seat of Government ; but its day was over and its importance faded gradually and its trade dwindled, and finally decay set in, and to-day Rhey is but a tangled maze of huge earth-mounds which once were palaces and mosques.

By chance we arranged our expedition for a Friday afternoon, and when we arrived there were people everywhere enjoying their weekly day of rest in the country. For Rhey is the Hampstead Heath of Teheran, and the Persians, like the Egyptians, are very fond of, and very thorough over, their outings. Persian boys bicycle out into the country just like we do in England, and most families aim at taking their free days out of doors as often as possible. We expressed our surprise at such crowds, but our host told us that they were nothing to the crowds which invaded the place on *Nauruz*—New Year's Day, which we had seen celebrated on our arrival at Mosul. That day *every* Persian family leaves the home, lock, stock, and barrel. For on *Nauruz* the Devil—*Sheitan*—goes about like a roaring lion and searches the houses seeking whom he may devour. So from dawn there is a general exodus out of doors. Father carries the carpet, mother the samovar, the elder boys take the parrot or the canary or the goldfinch—for Persians love birds in cages—while the daughters divide the babies and the day's food among themselves.

I wish we could have seen the place on *Nauruz*. But what we did see was as good as a play. Between the road where we left the car and the ruins themselves we had about a mile across country, and we were not alone, but in a solid stream of humanity all going our way. It lay across cornfields streaked with good-size irrigation runnels, along which were planted trees, mostly willows, in long straggling lines. It was real stiff country, for every runnel was brimming, and some were five or six feet wide. I hadn't laughed so much for years. Persian ladies have neither the shape nor the dress nor the taste for steeplechasing, and on every brink there were droves of them—groups of black, shrouded, alpaca forms, squawking like so many hens. But very flirtatious hens. For not one of them would essay the leap without the aid of at least four males. And such laughter and giggles and tickles and pinches.

It was like helping Auntie over the stile after the village fête.

The further we went, the denser became the picnic world, and the noisier the holiday-making mood; and through the dusty mounds which hide the dull remains of the old town—they were to us quite as unintelligible as Nineveh—meandered jolly purling streams. Alongside the water were proper paths, and overhanging them and the water were rows of spreading willows, in the shade of which the family carpets were spread so close and thick that the paths looked like gay patchwork quilts. On each carpet sat a whole family. One end of each was reserved for the samovar, and round went trays of tea-glasses and sweetmeats and fruit, and everyone ate and drank and was gay. One mother chatted to another mother on another carpet as though they were gossiping over a backyard wall; and one lot of babies rolled about with another lot of babies, and every five minutes or so one of them fell into the water; and the older men read or talked together; and the young men and the boys made up teams to play a curious game which seemed to me a compromise between rounders and tip-cat.

The wicket was two stones, each about the size of a brick and placed like the piers of a bridge with a gap between them; and one team had an innings, while the other fielded. When a batsman came in, he put a short stick across the gap between the two bricks, and then took another longer and stouter stick, inserted it between the bricks, tipped the shorter stick as high in the air as he could, and then made a wild swipe at it to hit it before it fell. Each batsman had three goes, but if in those three goes he didn't manage to hit the short stick outside a marked ring, he was out. The fielders stood outside the ring, and if they caught the short stick once it was hit beyond the ring, the batsman was out; but if it fell, the striker was allowed to remain at the post, to which he ran as soon as he had made the successful blow. We must have seen at least twenty games in progress, and both of us longed to have a try. It looked grand exercise, and all the players were very good at it.

Our progress was naturally slow, but we did not mind, nor did we care when it came to a standstill. Our way was suddenly completely blocked by a large crowd in the middle of which a public conjurer was showing his paces. The crowd—all men—sat or stood round in a ring, while the man strutted up and down chattering like a cheapjack, describing one by one the articles of his stock-in-trade. He laid them all out in

turn on a strip of carpet—cups, blocks of wood, wands, eggs, plates, sticks, coloured balls, pieces of rope, and lengths of chain; and to judge from his audience, who laughed and laughed again, his patter must have been most entertaining—or most obscene. When he had worked the onlookers up to a sufficient state of excitement, he started on his tricks.

The first was free and for nothing and very elementary—a coloured ball which disappeared in an egg-cup with a domed top; but he did the trick well, and there was good applause. For his next he asked for an assistant from the audience, and a bright-eyed boy of about ten volunteered. He was made to hold an egg in his cap, but at the critical moment he lost his head and dropped the egg, which broke on the ground. His reward was a lusty kick on the behind from the conjurer, and he retired amid roars of laughter which grew into a scream of delight when the conjurer bent down, scooped up the remains of the egg from the dust, and ate it, shell and all. The disgraced youth was succeeded by another and more careful boy, and the trick proceeded normally. The conjurer took the egg from the boy's cap and with enormous spasms of contortion, most of which were highly indecent, he swallowed it whole. Then, after a pause during which he rolled his eyes as though in great pain, he put his fingers down his throat and sicked up ten brightly coloured handkerchiefs all knotted together. Then another pause and more pain, and finally a terrific heave and he was sick once more, and this time the egg reappeared. He then took the cap from the boy, placed the egg on the ground, and put the cap on top of it.

By this time the audience was well away and in a mood which the conjurer knew well how to exploit. Slowly he walked round and round the ring uttering strange incantations and waving a wand; next he clapped his hands loudly and made the gesture of throwing something into the air; and then, with a bump, he sat down hard on the ground and started to rock on his hunkers like a *fakir*. Everyone waited in expectancy, but the conjurer let them wait for at least a minute. He then broke into speech. "What is under the cap?" he cried. "You don't know? Do you think the egg is there, or something else? Ah! Ah! I know, but you don't. I am Haji Akhbar, the great magician, and if my noble friends will give me money, the secret shall be revealed to them." With that he leapt to his feet. "Who will give? Who will give?" Everyone looked very sheepish, for the Persians, like everyone

else, prefer to get something for nothing. "What," shouted the conjurer, "my art is not worthy of your alms? Ah, ignoble ones. You seek to find amusement and you are loathe to reward the entertainer. Who will give? Who will give?" This moved the crowd, and one man threw a tiny coin into the circle. The conjurer was furious. "A miserly reward," he screamed. "Are you not shamed?" And shamed they were, and curious also, and more coins followed and still more, and in the end he may have collected about a shilling.

When no further money was forthcoming, Haji proceeded with the trick. Taking his wand, he advanced on the cap with mincing, zigzag steps, and then, with a wealth of gesture, picked it up. There was nothing underneath it. The audience then broke into shouts of wonder. "Where is it? We want to know." The conjurer smiled proudly all round and, seizing the boy by the scruff of his neck, proceeded to cluck loudly like a hen; then he pressed the boy down into a squatting position, and finally produced the egg from the most prominent part of the boy's anatomy. Everyone shrieked with laughter, and I must say it was first-rate pantomime.

Although all this was happening in Persian, I was able to follow everything beautifully, as a young Persian who knew English attached himself to me and was an excellent interpreter. I think that he enjoyed airing his English quite as much as he liked helping the stranger. Anyhow, we made great friends. "That conjurer," he told me, "comes here every Friday, and every Friday does the same tricks, and everybody knows them inside out. But he always makes money, and on *Nauruz* he may easily take five toman; for when Persians are out on a holiday they are always generous to the poor, and it is all good fun." A very nice young man.

We wandered on, and there were more picnics and more games of tip-cat, but as we approached the outskirts of the ruins life seem to become more sedate, and most of the groups on the carpets were concentrated and restful. On one an elderly man was reading aloud from a book to a circle of friends; on another, eight men, squatting on their hunkers, were playing some game of dice on a wooden board; but the most original party was a group of perhaps twenty men who had taken their trousers off and had hung them on the branches of the trees over their heads. Looking very cool in their white drawers, they sat in two lines facing each other with their arms linked. In the middle sat a huge man with a black beard, and he was singing a song in which I recognized the word "Sara". When

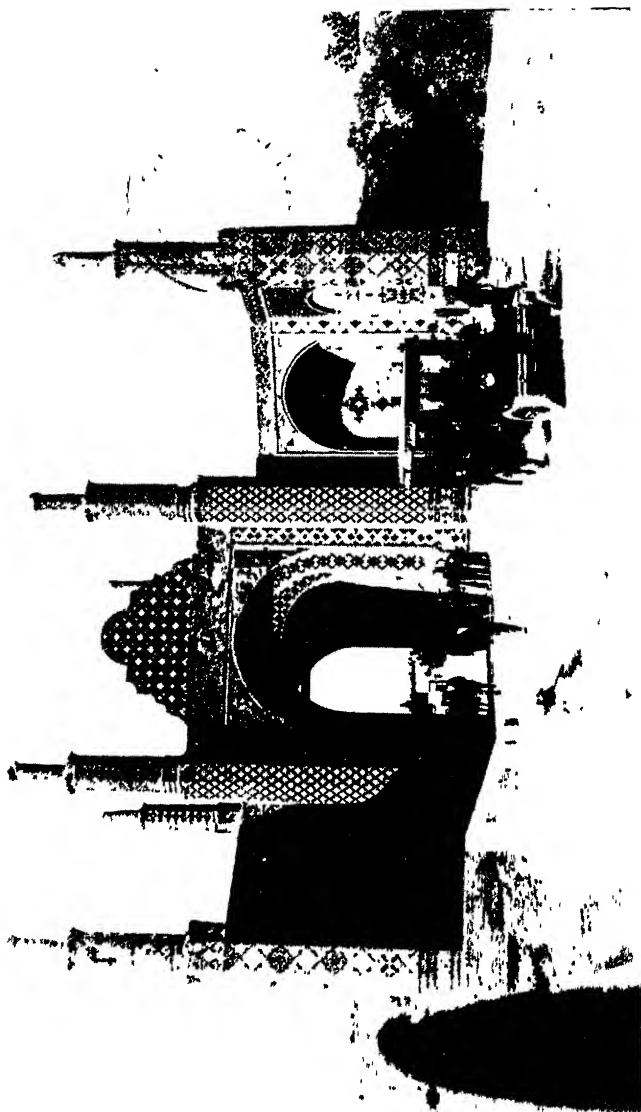
the refrain came, all the others joined in, swaying this way and that on their heels to the rhythm, and when the big man had finished his song everyone applauded loudly and he got up and filled a tray full of tea-glasses, and passed it round so that everyone might wet his whistle. Then a new singer stepped into the middle and it all began again. We loved it.

Outside the ruins there were three features of interest. Half-way up a low hill stood two Towers of Silence where the Parsees bring the bodies of their dead to be devoured by vultures ; and further on, carved on the rock-face of another hillside, were two bas-reliefs in an excellent state of preservation. One depicted a regal figure mounted on a horse and spearing a lion. This sculpture has had a curious history. It dates from antiquity, but some one hundred and fifty years ago a Kajar Shah re-edited the carving and had the original face and headdress of the figure remodelled after his own likeness. The remodelling is excellent and has given the rider a whimsical expression on his face, for all the world as though he had just heard a doubtful story and could not make up his mind as to whether it would be proper for him to laugh or not.

The second bas-relief was carved at the foot of a long, sloping cliff, and stands above a pool of water. It was quite modern, and depicted on one panel the Kajar Shah, Fath Ali, in the middle of his court, and on the other the same monarch under an umbrella with a hawk on his wrist. But the pool itself was really more interesting. It contains excellent water and is the most popular washing-place in Teheran for newly woven carpets ; and on the smooth rock face above and on both sides of Fath Ali's bas-relief, were rows and rows of carpets of all sizes, drying in the sun after being well soaked in the pool.



RHEY. A BAS-RELIEF CARVED ON THE ROCK FACE



TO THE CASPIAN
LEAVING TEHERAN BY THE FIRUZKUH GATE

CHAPTER XXXII

TO THE CASPIAN

WE had no end of bother leaving Teheran for our tour of the Caspian, and only Roy's devotion and pugnacity got us away. The trouble was, of course, permits and red-tape. But the bother over my departure for Meshed had taught us what had to be done, and four days before we were due to start Roy took our papers and George's to the permit office, and with the aid of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's interpreter explained our plans in full detail and the date on which we hoped to leave Teheran. The permit official took the documents and wrote down the facts and everything seemed in order; but after two days during which nothing happened, we began to get nervous. No one, particularly in a country like Persia, likes being long parted from his identification papers; and, although we were not fussing unduly, we thought it better after another day had elapsed to find out what was happening, as we did not want to leave matters to the last minute. So after breakfast Roy departed, leaving me writing at the Russian pension, picked up the Anglo-Persian interpreter on the way, and together they started on a pilgrimage to the permit offices which was to keep them walking, stalking and talking until noon. They first saw the officer with whom they had talked three days before. He flatly denied all knowledge of any previous communication, said he had never had our papers, and suggested in a rather hurt manner that their insistence on a previous conversation which he could not remember, was unreasonable, even rude, and that if they wished to be rude to anybody, perhaps they would go to the police department, where any sensible person would have gone in the first place for a travel permit.

That was that. But at police headquarters they drew another complete blank. No one knew or cared anything about us or our papers. Roy could understand their not knowing—

the office was a haystack of documents and passports piled on tables and chairs and the floor ; so he flatly refused to leave the place until he was satisfied that our papers were not buried somewhere in the muddle. The policeman shrugged his shoulders and remarked that he could search all day if he chose, but he would find nothing—a comment which was not exactly flattering to his department. However, Roy stuck manfully to his guns, and certainly no one obstructed him ; and sure enough, after a search of half an hour, there, sitting on top of a pile of papers on a desk only two away from that of the offended innocent, were all our papers neatly tied up together with tape—red, of course. The desk belonged to a clerk in civilian clothes who was picking his teeth. He showed no surprise at all when Roy claimed our papers ; but, when asked if the permits had been issued, he sucked his molars noisily and remarked wearily that he hadn't the slightest idea.

"But the passports are on your table, and they have been with you since Saturday."

"Have they?" said the clerk. "I don't want them."

"But are they now in order?"

The young man looked more tired than ever.

"You can look for yourself," he said.

Roy did look. Nothing had been done at all. So he put the lot into his pocket and was about to depart. This stirred the young man considerably.

"Put those back," he said sharply. "You can't take them away. Your permits must be issued from here."

Roy kept his head and his temper splendidly.

"Perhaps," he said. "But through the British Vice-Consul, and I'm going to him at once."

On paper, this may read as a threat ; but, in fact, it seemed to come as a great relief to the clerk. Someone else was going to be given the trouble of doing something which would have been a bother to him. And from that moment everything was easy. We ought, of course, to have gone to the Vice-Consul originally, instead of working on our own. He was on excellent terms with the authorities of the passport office, and that evening we had our papers back, and not only were they in order for our departure to the Caspian, but they were stamped and sealed for all the rest of our tour, including Shiraz and Tabriz and our final exodus at Kaniqin.

But next morning we were once more in trouble, and before we were finally clear of Teheran we had to run the

gauntlet of three more Dogberrys. Apparently—George had failed to spot this—our permits specified the gate by which we were to leave, and even after we discovered this we made two more bad shots before we found the right gate. And every time out came a greasy ledger and we had to groan out all the boring particulars of our family trees.

The gate marked on our papers was the Firuzkuh Gate ; and in the bright sunshine it seemed an almost more perfect specimen of tiled Persian art than the Kasvin Gate by which we had entered the capital. At once we began to climb through the same mountains over which I had flown on my way to and from Meshed. But as we climbed, the sun weakened, and soon it was cold enough for our overcoats, and at five thousand feet it began to drizzle. But the road, though steep, was excellent, and we made fine progress through wild open scenery with always the snowcap of Demavand to keep us company. George told us all about the mountain—that it was nineteen thousand feet high and the Monarch of Persia and an extinct volcano ; and then, having relieved himself of these statistics, he lapsed into folklore. At its summit lived a devil, and woe betide any stranger who invaded its lair. A few had succeeded, but all had returned mad and unable to explain what had happened to them. This was far more than I could swallow, as only three days before I had met an Englishman who told me that he had got to the top quite safely. George's comment was final. "I expect he was mad before he started. Only mad people would attempt to face the devil in his lair."

After an hour's driving we had a nasty shock. The car began to labour, and then it began to smell, and when we got out to investigate we discovered to our disgust that our brakes, which had been adjusted in Teheran, had been over-tightened and one of the drums was so hot that it was a good half-hour before it was cool enough to let us turn the release nut. This involuntary and unwelcome halt was by a country police station flanked by an inevitable *Chai-Khana*. But while we drank our tea, we had the fun of watching one of the policeman preparing himself and his kit for parade. He polished his uniform, polished his tin hat and oiled his rifle ; then he carried his ammunition clips to the water-butt, washed them all over, and then with a handful of sand polished the lot until they shone and shone again. I hope his officer was pleased. (Vide : *Musketry Instructions* : "The care of S.A.A. Mark VII"—"No sand, no water".)

In the next hour we climbed another fifteen thousand feet in growing mist to top a pass leading through a wide gorge down into an open moorland plain. Our road ran under the shadow of Elburz, the mountain range which separates the plain of Teheran from the Caspian littoral, and with the mist and the heather and the stony tors we might have been on Dartmoor. Then in the middle of blank emptiness we found a shop—a coal-shop. The mountains are coal-bearing, and in front of a shaft-head a man was sitting by a table above which was hung a sign. It was in French and Persian : "*Charbon à transporter à prix modéré*". We could have bought a sack or two over the counter and driven it away ourselves. Of course, it doesn't pay. Transport is too difficult ; but the coal will be convenient to the All-Persian railway when or if it is pushed on to Teheran.

We lunched in the welcome shelter of a tiny verandahed shepherd hut, but during our meal the mist thickened into cold blowing rain, and by the time we reached the village of Firuzkuh—the Mountain of Turquoise—it was pouring cats and dogs. And past it we were faced with another long, slow ascent through country which, under the leaden sky, reminded me of the post-war Somme.

And then the fun began. We cleared the Somme, only to find a still bleaker plateau across which our road, which was deteriorating rapidly, charged dead into yet another towering mountain range. The peaks were shrouded in mist, it got colder and colder, and at 7500 feet we were toiling up a narrow mountain valley along what was little more than a track cut in the side of the hill. I got down to close our curtains, and when I got back into the car all my fingers were burning with cold, just as though I had been snowballing. By this time we were at 8000 feet and in fine driving snow, and every five minutes I was up and out to wipe it off the windscreen to give Roy some view of what the map still called a road. And then it became so dark that we had to put on our lights. Poor George ! We could hear him in the rumble moaning with cold and despair, for this was far more than ever he had bargained for. And still we climbed : 8100, 8200, 8300 ; and then our aneroid told us that we were flattening out like an aeroplane. It was our only indication, as we could see nothing beyond our lights. For ten minutes it stayed between 8350 and 8300, and then, with horrid, frightening suddenness, we had to negotiate a hairpin turn. We were embarked on the long descent to the Caspian.

For a quarter of an hour we remained in snow and darkness, crawling in second gear round one hairpin turn after another. Then the snow ceased—we actually got below it—and it was once more driving mist and rain and a wind which roared and howled at us from the now exposed west. But we could see again. The track—in places as steep as the Cheddar Gorge—snaked its way under high, echoing cliffs; great mountain trees, their tops disappearing into the mist, formed arches over our heads; and far below ran invisible torrents in roaring spate. It was grand country, if only we could have seen it.

Naturally our progress was desperately slow, and we were still in the gorge when twilight descended on us and faced us with the problem of where we were to sleep. Not that there was much choice. The rare human habitations which we saw housed charcoal-burners who one and all regarded us with black frowns, and in one place some horrid little children, like gipsy brats, threw stones at us because we would not give them *baksheesh*. But something had to be done, as we had no intention of sleeping out in the open, and George was the one to do that something. So when we came to the next charcoal-burners' village, we sent him to enquire for accommodation. They gave him such a warm reception that he was quite pale when he returned to mumble, "Sir, it is not possible." The same thing happened at the next village, and the next and the next. By this time it was almost dark, and, with the situation desperate, I'm afraid I became very harsh. George had just returned with yet another, "Sir, it is not possible," and I could bear it no more. "George," I said with, I hope, some kindness in my tones, "say that again and I'll leave you behind with the charcoal-burners."

Happily for us all, there was no cause to put my threat into execution. Another three miles on and we rolled out into a gloomy, sodden valley. On either side of the torrent were tiny fields churned deep in mud; dreary oxen with their sterns to the gale stood knee deep and even belly deep in slush; a few dripping sheep clustered miserably under the shelter of a bank, and dotted everywhere through the swamp were round, squat bandstands, perched just above the floods on spindly bamboo legs and protected from the rain by tumbledown candle-extinguisher thatched roofs. They were the shepherds' look-outs, in this valley of amphibious life. But it was life, and there was a village—the largest we had seen so far; and once again—like Noah and his dove—we

sent George forth to scout over the face of the waters. This time—was it chance or the result of my speech?—he returned with, "Sir, it is possible. There is a grand hotel." The "grand" hotel was a straggling, derelict barn, and both rooms in the suite which was allotted to us, had to be emptied of noisy flocks of chickens before we got possession. But it was shelter from the storm, and the owner gave us a samovar and a brazier, and we put out our camp kit, and while the rain dropped through the roof and the wind howled under the door, we ate the same sort of meal as we used to eat in war-billets—parrot-food soup, bully beef, Heinz beans, tinned apricots, and ink-black tea.

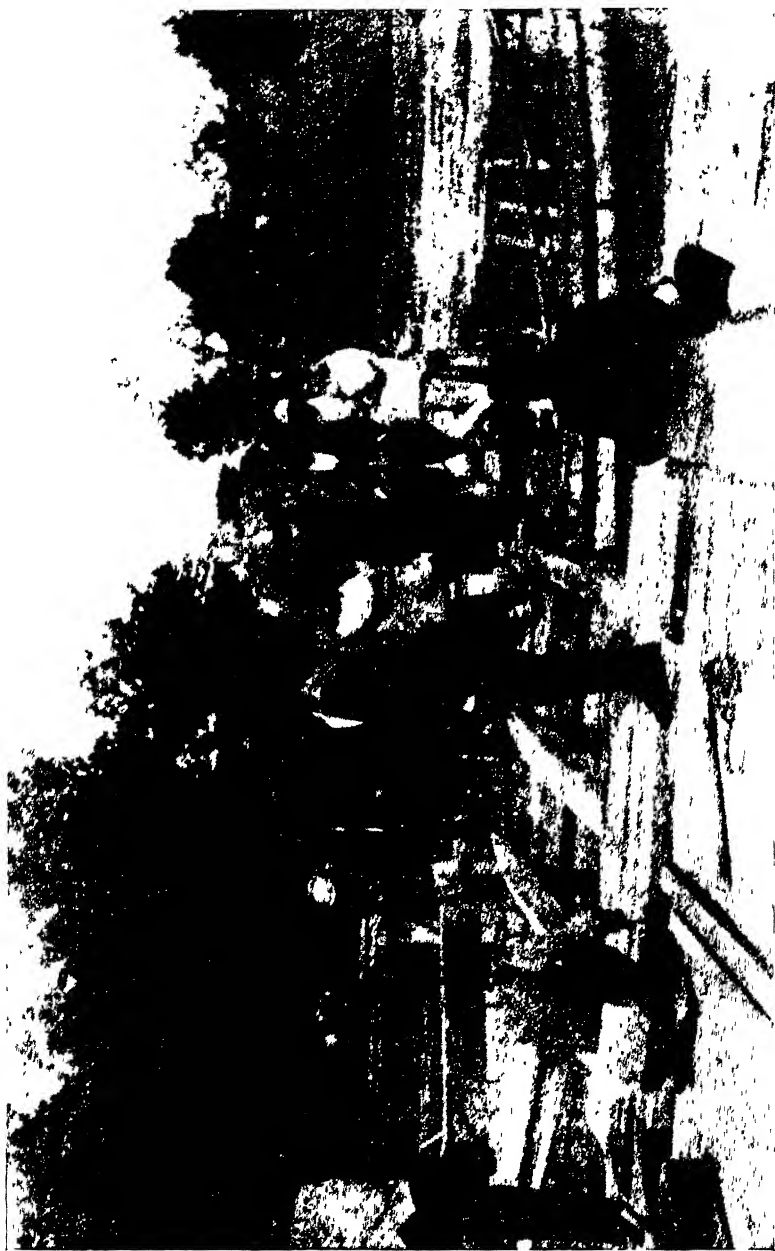
And somehow George fitted admirably into the war-time illusion. He had forgotten my hard words and had blossomed into the perfect comic batman, and his accounts of hen-fleas and Keatings lost nothing as he told them. The owner of the place had given him a settee by the cooking-stove, and when, later, we went to see if he was all right, we found him resigned and, in a curious fatalistic manner, quite enjoying himself; and just before I went to sleep I heard him from my bed, which only had a plank wall between it and his settee, talking to the men of the place, and his talk was the talk of a travelled man. He was actually having the time of his life.

All night it rained, and we left the "grand" hotel drearily. Our kit was damp, the car was damp, we were damp, and our hands were cold and our noses ran, and there was nothing in our first hour on the road to the Caspian to remove depression. The little valley soon narrowed into another gorge, the river was fuller and noisier than ever, and again mist robbed us of a view of what we knew must be grand wild country. And it was only Roy's nerve and judgment that kept us on the road at all. It was an unmetalled switchback, and when we were going up our wheels spun, and when we were going down we skidded, and every depression was deep mud and standing water. In one we passed—only just—an unfortunate post-lorry from Teheran which was stuck over the hubs in slush with its frozen passengers herded round it hopelessly. We discussed the future gloomily, for we had been told that the Caspian shores became waterlogged on the slightest provocation, and when at last the coastal plain opened before us, it was sheeted in every direction. But our gloom was not without some relief. The rain stopped and the clouds seemed higher, and across the flats a fine drying wind was blowing from the east. But these were cold comforts for



TO THE CASPIAN
OUR 'GRAND' HOTEL

THE CASPIAN BRIDGE BUILDERS



George, who was again reacting to his dislike of mountaineering, and sat silent in the rumble looking a picture of damp dejection. But his turn came. We were driving through a village, when two boys hailed us from the roadside. They had been waiting since overnight for the bogged post-lorry, and one of them held clasped in his arms the local post-box, painted in Persian national colours—green, red, and white; and, as we had already been a "Black Maria" in Syria, we had no objections to becoming a mail van in Persia. The two boys were just the tonic George wanted, and he quickly thawed both physically and mentally under the stimulating influence of a first-class Persian conversation. Persian conversations are usually on the lines that everyone talks at once and the greater lung power wins, and after a hot contest George won, and by the time we reached Aliabad he was back in his usual form.

Aliabad is the terminus of the northern section of the new All-Persia railway. There was a station and an engine-shed and a few empty trucks, but otherwise everything was rather pathetic. Beyond the station the line petered out blankly in the middle of nowhere with the two rails bent up in the air to take the place of buffers, and the two boys told us that there was hardly any passenger service at all. "But," they hastened to add, "when the line goes on to Teheran and Kasvin and Hamadan and perhaps to the Gulf, there will be no post-lorries. Then we will have mail trains like they have in Turkey."

As they were of the country, we left it to them to guide us, and in Aliabad they put us on a road which they said led to Barfarush. Twenty miles later, which by the map was the proper distance, we arrived at Barfarush and asked a policeman the way to Meshed-es-Saar, our destination on the Caspian. He greeted our enquiry with screams of laughter. We had come in completely the wrong direction and were in Sari, and now the only way to get to Barfarush was to go back all those twenty miles to Aliabad. We showed signs of being testy, until one of the boys took all the wind out of our sails. "Never mind," he said. "We are enjoying our ride in your motor, and we have plenty of time, and if you get us to Barfarush by mid-day we shall be quite content."

CHAPTER XXXIII

INTO CASPASIA

ONCE on the real road down to the Caspian I felt the same thrill that I had had three years before when Dick Crofton and I started from Fort Lamy in French Equatoria for Lake Chad. For ever since my schoolroom days three lonely waters of the world had always attracted me. I have bathed in Lake Chad; I have still to sledge across Lake Baikal in Siberia; and now I was going to see the Caspian. And the country toned with my mood. It was jolly fen country, and our road was a high twisting causeway standing well above neatly hedged rich fields, and everywhere there was colour—irises, poppies, yellow-wort and flags; and to our joy the wind was blowing harder than ever, and the further we went the drier our road seemed to become. So we made good progress and were quickly in Barfarush.

It was surprisingly large, and at first seemed far too modern for so primitive a part of the world. There were shops, poor but plentiful, and comfortable wooden houses and some fine buildings. We passed a huge domed bath and an attractive cone-shaped mosque; and our street through the town was wide and cobbled. But here again it was make-believe modernity. The Imperial Bank of Persia was in the old quarter, and when we turned off the boulevard there were no cobbles, only mud and potholes and narrow lanes and booths. The bank manager, a pleasant little Irishman, took endless trouble for us. We wanted local information about conditions ahead, and he rang up the town garage for us and sent for his head Persian porter, and both their reports were most reassuring. The garage proprietor affirmed that the new road along the littoral was now a *chaussée* and had just been remade in preparation for a visit from Shah Riza; while the porter assured us that so far as the hotel accommodation was concerned we would find the place a perfect Riviera.

This was better and better, and when we left the town and were out on the road to Meshed-es-Sar, there was something

about everything which was intriguingly different—as though we were in a new country. It was well populated, and the people looked far more Chinese or Mongol than Persian, and the villages too had a distinct atmosphere of the Far East. The houses looked almost Japanese with their wooden walls and squat wide-eaved roofs, and the mosques in appearance had no resemblance at all to any other Moslem mosques I had ever seen. They had no minarets or cupolas, and looked for all the world like ordinary houses. Their roofs were red and wide angled and jutted out yards beyond the walls; and in each the face towards the north was open and we looked into an empty earth-floored verandah standing two steps above the road level. On each southern wall was nailed a large wrought-brass plaque in florid design—one of them was a gorgeous peacock with its tail fanned to the fullest extent—and George told us that these plaques took the place of the traditional praying niches in the normal mosques, and that worshippers prayed towards them and thus towards the south and Mecca. But George was a curious Moslem. He said his prayers regularly, but his views on the sanctity of mosque buildings was hardly orthodox. It was biting cold in the wind, and we told him he must find us a sheltered place for our lunch, and his first suggestion was one of these mosques. "It is empty, and it is nice and clean, and you are my friends," he said, and he thought we were most unduly particular when we said that nothing could induce us to offend respected Moslem susceptibilities.

Eventually we lunched in a *Chai-Khana*, and five miles further on we reached Meshed-es-Sar. It was entirely Oriental, a straggling squalid shack town of narrow twisting lanes, and the rain had begun again and the place was a sea of mud, and, worst of all, the inevitable Dogberry told us that we would never get across the river as the bridge was broken and the ferry was out of action. When we did reach the river our hearts sank. The ferry, which anyhow would have been far too small for our weight, was moored against the further bank, there was a yawning gap in the middle of what had been a plank bridge, and the river was in wild spate, and all along its banks lay the timber baulks and trestles which had been the bridge. We sent George to prospect, but he was back in a minute with a relieved smile. "Sir, it is not possible." I could have boxed his ears.

"George," I said, "you are afraid. You are like a woman. Come with me. It is possible."

When I got to the bridge I felt far less confident. There was a gang already working, and we found a Persian foreman who shrugged his shoulders and said, "*Insha'allah*" ("Please God"); but the gap was thirty yards wide and the river rushed through it like a mill-stream, and one thing was quite certain—we would not cross that night. That meant that we must find some place where we could sleep, and we were just asking the foreman for guidance, when suddenly from the town there rose a wild noise of countless whistles and bells, and at once the foreman and all the labourers threw their hands into the air and started to scream. Then they hurled their tools on the ground and rushed pell-mell up the bank and disappeared into the town shouting as they went. The town was on fire, and when a wooden town goes on fire, the quicker every man, woman, and child gets on the job to put it out, the better for everyone. That left us stranded; but I bethought myself once again of my London letter of introduction from the Persian Legation, and off we went through the mud along the river bank to the police station. The letter worked marvels. Just as we arrived all the force returned in a body, having put out the fire, and the corporal placed himself entirely at our service. Next day he would get us across the river somehow, even if all his men had to swim the car over, and for our immediate needs he himself would introduce us to the proprietor of the New Hotel.

It *was* new—in fact it was still unfinished—and we were actually its first guests, but it had a garage, and our rooms on the first floor opened gaily on to a wide verandah, and we soon had charcoal fires to dry us and our clothes, and we retired to rest until seven, when we were assured dinner would be ready. At eight-thirty we were still waiting, and we issued an ultimatum. We would give them ten minutes' grace, but if by that time they had produced no food we would eat our own and they could whistle for our dinner money. George interpreted with much gusto, for he too was famished, and in the end the day closed in an atmosphere of hope. After an excellent meal and two flasks of vodka the police corporal arrived to say that the repairs were going well and that at eight o'clock in the morning we would be across. We heaved a sigh of relief, ordered more vodka, and stood our excellent corporal a brimming jorum.

The traveller who banks on a Persian-made timetable has only himself to blame if he is disappointed, and sure enough, just as we were setting out for the bridge at eight

o'clock next morning, up arrived our corporal at the double to say that the bridge would not be repaired for at least another two hours. True, his news was no great surprise to us, as from the hotel we could hear the repair gang still slamming away with hammer and nail, but the delay left us with idle time on our hands, and to pass it the three of us sallied forth on foot to the mouth of the river to have our first view of the Caspian. But when we got there there was only a dull grey sea pounding in great combers up a flat sandy foreshore which, save for a group of tumbledown fishermen's shacks, was as empty as the Norfolk marshes round Brancaster golf-links. The sea itself—which George called "the ocean"—was just a large dreary expanse of water, unrelieved by any feature of interest.

Round the shacks, however, was grouped a party of extremely fierce-looking Turcomans, wearing the black sheep-skin bonnets of their race, and what intrigued me still more was that their features, instead of being Persian, were pure Tartar with slanting eyes and high cheekbones and wide heavy nostrils. At first they were quite certain that they did not want to be photographed; but when I opened my camera and after a good deal of coaxing got them to peer through the view-finder they weakened at once and insisted on having a look at everything through the mirror—their shack and then, in turn, each other; and finally I told George to tell them that if they allowed me to look at them through the "window" I would be very grateful. So I got my picture; but when he explained that I had now photographed them, far from being angry, they were as pleased as Punch, and with wide grins held out their hands for the results. I gave them cigarette-cards all round, and they were absolutely satisfied and very proud.

Thus we passed an hour of our wait, and when we got back to the hotel Roy and George went on to the bridge while I stayed behind in the hotel to write. But when Roy returned his report was far from reassuring. They were making progress, he told me, but the bridge would be such a "Heath Robinson" erection that he doubted whether we were wise to attempt it. This was gloomy news indeed, and for a while we discussed the alternative of returning to Teheran direct. But before we decided anything Roy suggested that I ought to go and look for myself, and that while I was away he would get the car up to the bridge and then we would be ready to cross it or not as we should decide.

When I saw the bridge I felt far less depressed. To start

with there was now in charge of the repair gang a very pleasant German who was in Persian Government employ and had been sent from Teheran to Mazanderan Province to inspect communications, as the Shah was going to tour the whole district in the near future. But what cheered me still more was that the German had been told by the Persian Governor of the province that by hook or by crook this bridge must be mended by noon, when he intended to cross the river on inspection. "And," added the German, "my job is as good as lost if some sort of bridge is not ready by noon. For in Persia Governors are Governors, and their punishments are Persian, and I have no intention of becoming unemployed these hard times." He was certainly doing his utmost, and, though the repairs were highly unorthodox, the bridge was lengthening across the gap rather like an extending ladder. Its construction was extremely rickety. They had anchored the ferry in the middle of the gap and were building gangways at it from both sides. The gangways consisted of long baulks of timber stretched from the broken edges of the bridge on to the ferry, and when I arrived a plankway was being nailed on to these baulks as fast as possible. And the repair gang was putting all its soul into it. Crash, bang, crash, bang; they hammered and nailed and chopped and sawed; some of the planking was thick, some was thin; some of the nails went straight, some went crooked; but the bridge was growing, and I thought of the motto which Isidor Brunel had carved on the pylons supporting the Clifton suspension bridge across the Avon—"Vix Patitur Via". This roadway would certainly resemble a crazy pavement, and was being built with great difficulty, but a way was being opened for us.

Meanwhile the German and I had drifted into more general conversation, which eventually brought us to Africa. Had I been there? he asked, and did I know Tanganyika—'*Unser Ost Afrika*'? He had been there before the war building the railway, and he talked of Dar-es-Salaam and Kajera, of Tanga, Moshi and Arusha, and to hear him was like hearing a homesick man talking of his people and his garden. For the Germans had loved Tanganyika. He had done all the campaign with Von Lettow and had ended up at Armistice-time in Portuguese East Africa—a fugitive, but still fighting. "But it was a humane war. You, like us, were white men among niggers; and when we captured your officers and men, although naturally we disarmed them, they ate and played and slept with us, and in the end we were all very good friends. I wish I could

meet some of them again." And then he laughed. "Funny, isn't it," he commented, "that you and I should be talking quite calmly about it all here on the Caspian?"

We were soon interrupted by the arrival of the Persian Governor himself. He was young, spoke English and French excellently, and, without asking whether or no the bridge would be ready, said that he would bring his car along at noon. The German bowed and made no comment, which, so far as I was concerned, clinched matters, and, feeling greatly elated, I left the turmoil of the bridge repairs to break the news to Roy. But he, meanwhile, had been engulfed in a far less pleasant turmoil. He had started to drive from the hotel to the bridge, and outside the gate the car had stuck across a steep greasy slope down towards the river. But just as I arrived it struggled free—a mass of mud. Roy likewise was clotted, and so also a troupe of urchins who had been recruited to push. But George was spick and span. Roy was furious with him. To start with he had preferred to remain in the rumble and smile, and when forcibly ejected by Roy to do some work—George pronounced it "warrk"—he had retired on top of a convenient wall and all he had done was to shout instructions. Altogether he had been useless and tiresome. However, all was now well, and Roy ate four oranges to wet his parched mouth, and then on we went to the bridge, which the German now declared to be finished. To me it looked even more like a crazy pavement than ever; and evidently the Persian Governor was inclined to share my opinion; for no sooner had we arrived than with a low bow he waved us on. "Sir," he said to me with a knowing glance at the bridge, "as you are a stranger in Persia, it is my pleasure, nay, my duty, to offer you precedence on our Persian highway." (Or, in other words, if there is going to be a funeral it is not going to be mine.) However, that was that, and off we went. Our passage over the gap was like a spell on the Witching Waves at Wembley. Every baulk of timber rattled and bounced as it took our weight; simultaneously the ferry tipped at us at the most alarming angle, and from the further gangway supports nails soared heavenwards like rockets. Then, after a moment on an even keel, the ferry did another colossal cant away from us, and how that second gangway held I don't know, but it did, and, to the accompaniment of more bursts of machine-gun fire as the now loosened baulks on the second gangway leapt and twisted as we crossed, we heaved ourselves on to the solid bridge and the road lay open before us into Caspasia.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CASPIAN

OUR first view of Caspasia was of open sandhill country with a brown untidy track swinging to and from the sea. There was the jolly noise of waves crashing up the beach, and the wind was keen and drying, and the sun shone, and everywhere the gorse was in full bloom. All was very well with us and the world. And then almost suddenly we were done with sandhills and I might have been back in Africa. We were entering Hyrcanea, where in other days the Romans used to collect lions for their Great Games; and the villages were stoutly palisaded—for, although we did not see them, there are still bears and hyenas and panthers in Hyrcanea; and the houses had the thatched candle-extinguisher roofs of Equatoria; on the rivers—we crossed so many that we had lost count in an hour—fishermen were working their fishing traps from dug-out canoes which might have come straight from the Congo. Only the people were un-African. They were also in appearance quite un-Persian. Indeed, both sexes were much more of the Balkans—the men baggy-trouserred, stocky, and shock-headed; and the women—only a few hid their faces as we passed—wore gay-coloured, bunchy gipsy skirts and embroidered waistcoats and on their heads red and orange and pink handkerchiefs.

But between the villages it was Africa again. Our track snaked its way through sheer waterlogged jungle. On either side the trees were wallpapered with creepers and there was no air, only the heavy eerie silence of rotting vegetation and dank slimy pools. The lorry hated it. Not only did it overheat, but the track had been remade for the Shah's visit, with disastrous results. A foot of slippery grey shingle had been strewn, haphazard, on the shifting sand, and, though it looked lovely, it flattered but to deceive. We did not actually stick, but we left ruts inches deep, and finally ended up for safety with two wheels on the footpath hardened by the passage of

the road gangs, where at any rate there was some sort of a hold.

It was dreary, hot work, and progress was exasperatingly slow, and it was not until mid-afternoon that we were clear of jungle and back on to the seashore again. And then, in a sense, it was out of the frying-pan into the fire. The passage of endless animals, which incidentally disintegrate sandy surfaces far more thoroughly than motor-wheels, had churned the track into cruel treacherous powder for a width of a hundred yards, and inevitably we stuck. But we did not take it too seriously. In a village some ten miles back we had overtaken a post-lorry, one of whose passengers had disappeared to see a friend and had failed to return, and as he had not paid his fare, and as lorry-timetables on the Caspian have none of the rigidity of the laws of the Medes and Persians, the driver had no intention of going on without him. So we knew that sooner or later it would catch us up with its load of passengers, all of whom could push; and after a quarter of an hour along it came, rolling and lurching. George rushed back to signal to the driver to avoid the bad patch in which we had foundered, but the driver waved him grandly aside and, of course, stuck too. As a matter of fact that suited us down to the ground. For we helped to push him out and he helped to push us out, and no one had to be polite to anyone.

But we had wasted another precious half-hour of daylight, and for hours we had not seen a single decent *Chai-Khana*, to say nothing of that chain of Riviera hotels promised us by the Barfarush porter, and with the sun tumbling into the west we began to feel anxious about shelter for the night. However, the lorry-driver told us that there was an inn in a village only ten miles ahead, and on we went. Ten miles passed, then fifteen, and never a sight of a human habitation. Indeed, the only life we met was a party of wild-bearded men in charge of a herd of lumbering, twin-humped, sable-coloured Bactrian camels, who knew nothing and cared less about hotels, so that at last we were driving blankly under a gorgeous moon and were just resigning ourselves bleakly to a night in the open on our camp-beds, when to our relief we saw a fine bright light ahead, shining from the balcony of a solid-looking, two-storied house.

It must be the hotel, we thought, and George went off to spy out the land. As usual he was back almost at once with the usual reply. "But," I said desperately, "did you tell them that we were English and very tired?" "Yes," said George, "but it is not possible." By this time the balcony was

crowded, and, feeling rather like Romeo addressing Juliet, I advanced with George for further parley. But there really was no room, for one of the party on the verandah, a fine, fat, black-moustached man, was also short of his night's accommodation, and he shouted down asking us for a lift. This put us in a much stronger position, and I told George to say that we would carry him anywhere—to Glory if he wished—so long as he would guarantee us a roof over our heads that night. The man rushed down the ladder from the balcony with obvious relief, and George explained more fully. Whereupon the man gave a grand laugh and slapped his chest like a gladiator. "Easy!" he shouted. "You couldn't have found a better man. To-morrow you take me to Shahzawar, ten parasangs along the coast, and to-night I will take you to a fine village only two parasangs along your road where the head-man has a fine house, and you and I will be his guests and our night will be blessed. You see, that head-man is two years in arrears with his taxes, and I am the local tax-collector. Only you must take my escort with me. But you needn't worry about him. He is as thin as a rake."

The escort was a tiny little policeman about the size of an emaciated marmoset, and soon we had him curled up on our valises over the tailboard while the jolly tax-collector and George shared the rumble. And at once both of them started talking at the top of their voices—a real Persian conversation with honours easy. George's eloquence dwelt on our ignorance as strangers, and he explained that he was piloting us round because we did not know how to look after ourselves. Then the tax-collector told George that, though his present job was admittedly humble, he was about to secure a very important post in Teheran. And so on and so on. Every now and then I would interrupt them. "What about that village?" And the answer was always the same. "Just a little further." We ended by covering twelve instead of eight miles, but at last there was a village. We rattled over a noisy bridge spread with singing sleepers like the notes on a xylophone; and beyond, up a sharp rise, stood a collection of tumbledown wooden huts. This was the "fine" village. In one hut there flickered a light. This was the "fine" house; and when we stopped opposite it, the tax-collector jumped out and ran inside. And then there ensued a commotion "off", as though they were killing the pig. But after five minutes it ceased as suddenly as it had begun and out came the tax-collector, shouting, "The head-man says you are very welcome!"



A CASPIAN HOSTEL
' THE 'FINE' HOUSE IN THE 'FINE' VILLAGE '



A CASPIAN RICE FACTORY

Our entry was up two earthen steps on to a sand-strewn platform opening into a kitchen, then up two more steps on to a flimsy verandah, and there the head-man, with almost pathetic deference—I believe that he thought we were going to arrest him—pointed to a door which led into his guest-room and told us that it would be prepared at once for our reception, and that he, too, hoped our night would be blessed. So we set to unloading the car. The marmoset took both our beds, the tax-collector the luncheon basket and the table and chairs, and the two sons of the house our two valises; and soon, with George in proud charge, everything was in the guest-room, which by this time had been lit with two lamps and strewn with carpets. It was a tiny oblong cell, mud-walled and white-washed, and opposite the door was a fireplace which looked like an altar; and by the time we were settled in all the village was in attendance to watch our unpacking. And then mine host produced two grand braziers and twenty-four eggs, and George in a fit of enthusiasm broke the lot into a saucepan with about a pound of butter and started scrambling them all like fury over a brazier. We had a grand meal, and it taught me once and for all that the only way to enjoy eggs to the full is scrambled by the dozen and eaten in soup-plates with spoons.

But after supper life became complicated. Our previous experiences with my snoring made it essential, if either of us were to enjoy proper sleep, that only one should use that anchorite cell; so, according to plan, we tossed for it. I lost, and out I went on to the flimsy verandah to make my bed. The sons of the house helped me. They gasped with excitement as my bed trestled out into shape; they marvelled when my valise unrolled into blankets and pillows; but when I hoisted my mosquito net they all but ran away. And I must say in the moonlight it did look rather ghastly—a sort of compromise between a roadside shrine and a meat-safe. Meanwhile George, his work done for the day, had repaired to the kitchen, and, as I lay in my bed, through a crack of the door I could see him and the jolly tax-collector and mine host sitting cross-legged on the floor round another brazier eating noisily with their fingers out of flat porringers. Behind them stood the sons of the house, and in the background circulated the women, the mother and two very pretty daughters, brewing tea and preparing more savoury messes for their honoured menfolk.

I put out my light and lay watching and listening. A party

of villagers, lanterns in hand, passed below me singing softly ; the voices in the kitchen rose and fell—now it was the jolly tax-collector, now George, never anyone else ; a lanky pi-dog chased imaginary robbers until he wearied of barking ; and away beyond the lagoon which we had crossed by that noisy bridge, the Caspian murmured and sighed—thud, swish-h-h, thud, swish-h-h ; and beneath the moon, Nistarud—for that was the name of the village—quietly settled down for the night.

In due course I too slept. But not for long. Unbeknown to me, my verandah roofed the family stockpen, and mine host's cows and goats and calves and chickens had apparently never heard British snores before. After what time I know not, the cows became uneasy and started to fret ; that upset the goats, who maa-ed and began to fidget ; that upset the calves, who thought it was a new game and started to gambol ; and in their gambols they upset two perch-loads of the loudest chickens I have ever heard either in Persia or elsewhere. My night was far from blessed. Indeed, waking or sleeping I was haunted throughout with the horrible feeling that I had been marooned at Whipsnade.

CHAPTER XXXV

BACK TO TEHERAN

AFTER my uneasy night I was awake with the first light of dawn, and lay absolutely still looking out into the east. Soon the lagoon caught the light and two conical-shaped thatched houses stood reflected in its still mirror. Then the world began to stir. First a posse of lean, hump-backed cows straggled down to the water to drink ; then the lanky pi-dog came all the way up to my verandah to have a look at me in bed ; then round the kitchen door peeked first one and then the other of the two pretty daughters of the house to see what the mosquito net looked like by daylight ; then out stumbled George, a rakish, stubbly figure, looking as though he had slept in his clothes, which, of course, he had done ; then interesting sounds began to issue from the kitchen ; and finally the head-man carried a basin of hot water into Roy's anchorite cell ; and while we shaved, George tended the Quaker oats and scrambled another dozen eggs. We and Nistarud were embarked upon another day.

The only hitch in our departure was the question of the payment for our food and lodging. The jolly tax-collector told us on no account to pay anything. The head-man, he said, was a defaulter, and was lucky not to be in gaol. But after all those eggs we just couldn't merely shake hands, and George agreed. "But," he wisely remarked, "don't tell the tax-collector. If he knew that you had given anything, he would collar it as 'something on account'." So this is what we did. George told the tax-collector that we would pay nothing ; I slunk back to the cell and left on the mantelpiece what we would call in this country "something for the children" ; George told the head-man what I had done ; and the head-man slunk after me to see if it was enough. It was ; and when the time came for us to go we shook hands with knowing winks and the tax-collector was none the wiser.

He and the Marmoset continued with us for another twenty-five miles to Shahzawar, where they left us with many

expressions of gratitude, and after buying petrol—to our disgust, the only available stock was Russian—we swung abruptly inland and began a long tortuous progress through endless vistas of monotonous rice-fields. On both sides of our road were chessboards of small plots, terraced with tiny banks of puddled mud. Most of them were flooded for cultivation and looked like dirty ponds; and ponderous bullocks driven by mud-caked peasants ploughed hock-deep through the brown, oozy slush. Rice, whether in landscapes or puddings, is terribly dull. But the villages—and they were many—were cheerful and homelike. The houses were thatched. There were shady trees in front of them, and between them open grass spaces like village greens; and under one venerable oak I found violets and primroses and periwinkles and forget-me-nots; and later, banking a tiny rushing brook, was a great bed of rustling white irises.

At last we cleared the rice-country, and for the next hour our road ran through pleasantly wooded foothills. Here the villages were stouter built, and in one we halted so that I might take a picture of yet another Aligarm, another medicinal spring, which bubbled and steamed in a circular, stone-faced pool. To get a good view I decided to climb a wall from which I could look down on the water, and, watched by all the village, I clambered up as well as I could, and at last, with a heave, landed myself on top. I stayed there for precisely half a second. Then, with a gasp, I ducked, lost my foothold, and fell flat on my back on the ground where I had started. The villagers roared with laughter. They knew. In that half-second I had had a fleeting glimpse of at least thirty buxom and absolutely nude females splashing about waist high in steaming water. For my wall was the protection of the ladies' bathing-pool. I felt just like one of the naughty elders in the book of Susanna caught red-handed.

Then to our disgust our road turned seawards again and we were back in the ricefields. But this time it was not quite so dull. We were in the factory area, and saw any number of curious "Heath Robinson" rice polishing and grinding machines. They were worked with the minimum of fuss by water power from the mountain streams, which turned wheels and worked great baulks of timber which rose and fell on heaps of rice which the children of the owner kept swept into cones beneath the falling weights. It was all as deliciously primitive as is the mediæval bowl-factory which still operates on Bucklebury Common in Berkshire.

Nevertheless, the day was bathos after the happy unorthodoxies of its predecessor ; and once we left Mazanderan Province for Gilan, the richest and best cultivated province of all Persia, we began to react violently against its comparative tidiness and orderliness. It seemed a garden-city country. The people were well dressed and sophisticated ; the villages were laid out in lines of houses ; and in Rud-i-Sar, where we finally turned our backs on the Caspian, lamp-posts had just been put up to be lit for the first, and probably the last, time when the Shah would pass that way. And to crown everything, in Rud-i-Sar, too, a man was plying with a sort of camera obscura at a penny a peep in which we saw pre-war Russian ships, the Eiffel Tower, some very décolleté Parisian ladies, and finally Shah Riza himself.

Our road to Resht, where we were to spend the night, followed the Safid Rud (River Safid), and eventually we had to cross it. It is a wide, meandering stream, and before we reached the main channel, where there was an excellent ferry, we had to ford two minor branches, flowing between long flat spits of sandy shingle. Alone, we would never have found our way across, but happily everything is excellently arranged for the traveller. We paid a fee to the ferry-master which entitled us to the services of an excellent navigating officer, and George interpreted splendidly for Roy at the wheel ; and, although we were hub-deep in both fords, everyone kept his head and the lorry neither whimpered nor faltered. We had another lorry—a Chevrolet—with us on the ferry across the main channel. Its Persian owner had driven a Ford A.S.C. van for the Dunsterville Expedition and spoke a little English, and was wildly enthusiastic over our 1931 Ford, the first of the model which he had seen. Just before we got off the ferry he took George aside and suggested to him in all seriousness that we should swop. He would give us his Chevrolet and four hundred Tomans (£4), and would take our Ford in exchange ; and when we said no, he blandly suggested a deal outright—on the hire-purchase system !

Beyond the ferry the road was really excellent. It also had been remade for the Shah's visit, and we passed three triumphal arches which had been built for the occasion. But the foliage decoration on all three was dead. Apparently the Shah had changed his plans at the last moment, which is a common practice with him, to keep everyone dancing at the end of a string not knowing when he will arrive, and these arches had already been decorated three times and His Majesty was still in Teheran.

Gilan Province is intensely religious, and as we went along we began again to see mullahs, grave and rather imposing in their black robes and turbans ; and in one village some twenty miles short of Resht we had to drive clean through a ceremony connected with the feast of Moharrem. The street was crammed with women squatting on the ground, looking, with their shrouds and visors, like a swarm of blackbeetles on a pantry shelf. In the middle was a band, a cornet, two drums and a double-bass, playing an odd droning tune somewhat like a negro spiritual, and as they played the women bowed their heads over their knees and wailed. George told us what they were doing. "They were 'wiping' (weeping) for the death of Hussein. First they 'wipe' in the street, and then they go into the mosque and 'wipe' again, all the time for Hussein. He was our great Imam, and he was murdered by Shem, who cut off his head and ran away with it. When they have finished 'wiping' in the mosque, one man of the village will disguise into Shem, and all the girls will gather round to curse him and to beat him and to 'wipe' ; and they beat him very hard, and often he is very hurt. But he does not mind, for afterwards they pay him for his beating." There was no question of our waiting to watch this play, even if we could have done so ; for the crowd, though orderly, was very much in earnest, and there was not a woman who did not hide her face as we passed, and all the men scowled at us. So Roy drove very carefully and quietly, and both of us were much relieved to be through the village and out in open country again.

But the episode seemed to demoralize George. We were now quite close to Resht, and there was a regular network of roads, and every road was crowded with ladies proceeding to the ceremony ; and he became so interested in them that he had eyes only for them and not at all for the signposts, which, being in Persian writing, were Greek to us. Twice we went astray, and in the end I told him that if he didn't stop looking at the girls I would shut him in with our curtains, and then he would see nothing at all.

Resht is a fine modern town with boulevards in every direction, and a main square boasting a fountain and a bandstand, and on one side a town hall and a town clock which went, and a great barrack of an hotel where we found excellent accommodation. And Resht also produced a long-lost cousin of mine, thanks to whom the two days we spent there were delightful. Not that the town itself is interesting ; but my cousin took us down to the Caspian port of Pahlevi, the former Enzeli, which

had been the Dunsterville base for the raid on Baku, and which before the war was the Russian naval base from which they controlled their sphere of influence in Persia as laid down by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

The harbour divides Pahlevi in two, and the southern township where we arrived was dull and ugly. Two- and three-storied houses flanked the narrow streets, and, though the shops were well stocked—all from Russia—and there was the oddity of a former lighthouse which was now a town-clock, there was nothing to see of interest. But the harbour itself is a fine sheet of water, well wharfed and commodious, and it was practically empty. The Russian mail steamer which runs a weekly service to Baku was moored against the northern wharf between two oil-tankers; but otherwise there was nothing afloat save for one or two picturesque lateen-sailed fishing junks which might have come straight off the Yangtse Kiang, and one very ancient Persian sloop, which I hope, for its sake, will never be called upon for active service. We were ferried across in a smartly cushioned rowing-boat which was quite in keeping with the atmosphere of the northern township, a neat and clean and sophisticated place containing the main Government and business buildings and looking exactly like a Black Sea summer resort out of season. For the Pahlevi which we saw was very, very dead; indeed, the only distinct memory of the place which remains in my mind is the purchase of a bucketful of delicious green caviare for sixpence.

Resht, too, left few positive memories; but perhaps that was not its fault. After the Caspian it was anticlimax, and into the bargain we were rather fretting to get back to Teheran so that we could start as quickly as possible on our long trek south to Shiraz.

Our road up to the central plateau—a climb of some 5000 feet—again followed the Safid Rud, and we were away with the dawn and in fine spirits, especially George. As we climbed out of Resht, he broke into shrill song, and for an hour he carolled blithely and nasally and incessantly. His song was all about a lady who had almond eyes and cheeks pink like the oleander, who cooed like a dove and walked like a panther; and eventually I got so tired of her monotonous charms that I turned round in protest. "Well, whoever she is, she won't look at you with a beard like that. You look a perfect fright." George was momentarily startled, but soon smiled blandly. "Sir," he said, "she likes bearded men. Only the

strong are bearded. She told me so." I could think of no reply, but I eyed him knowingly. Apparently I had not been so very wrong about that "cousin".

I had been, of course, unnecessarily sharp with George, but at the time I was not in a mood to enjoy anything. For the rain had started to fall, and a mist had drifted down the hills blotting out the scenery, and the way was long and the wind was cold and, like the Minstrel, I was feeling infirm and old. After Manjil—yet another Dunsterville base—which enjoys and, as we discovered, merits the title of the Persian "Home of the Winds", the rain stopped and we lunched by a deserted *Chai-Khana* where a grandfather and his grandson watched us eat; and later, in return for a gift of an empty bully-beef tin and two layers of Persian bread, they saved George the trouble of washing up. We always carried Persian bread with us, but not to eat. For, although the first two mouthfuls taste delicious, the consistence of the dough is so heavy that it needs a Persian digestion to cope with it. But as a gift in return for services rendered it was invariably popular, and into the bargain it was no bother to carry, as it rolled up like felt, which, as a matter of fact, is what it looked and tasted like.

We had originally intended to spend our night at Kasvin, but when we got there, we and the car were going so strong that we decided that we would push straight through to Teheran, which would mean a day's run of 208 miles, our longest up to date. But it was well worth while. Night had fallen and the road was empty, and as an experiment we drove faster than usual to test whether fast driving would minimize the bumps which had so annoyed us over this stage a fortnight before. As an experiment it was a success. Although we averaged well over twenty miles an hour instead of our former fourteen, the car went far smoother and the steering was far easier, and as a result we were in Teheran and through the police control by eight-thirty p.m., and an hour later we were both sound asleep in our pension, where the poor Russian proprietor had received us with real Imperial gusto.

CHAPTER XXXVI

KUM

Teheran is a disappointing place, and has got badly on my nerves. Red-tape is rapidly stifling pleasure for everyone, and it got us properly by the throat with all those formalities and a Government which seemed out of its senses pestering us, as well as everybody else, with its ingenious lunacies. I used to feel the same in Germany before the war, and last summer I got just as nervy in Russia. Thank goodness, Teheran is not Persia. I like Persia.

THIS is from my diary, written rather late in our last evening in Teheran, and it needs no elaboration. Both of us were delighted to be leaving, and had no regrets that we should not return.

Our last hour in Teheran, though it had nothing to do with Teheran itself, was tense. We had told George to be with us at half past six, by which time we had had our breakfast and were ready to pack the lorry. But no George. And when he did arrive an hour later I was so angry that I refused to listen to any of his excuses and fined him four days' pay out of hand. He smiled. "What does that mean?" he said. "Is that fair?" I replied that he was under our orders and had disobeyed them. "Oh no," he said, "I could not disobey you. It was not my fault. I forgot to open my shutter when I went to sleep, and naturally I could not wake." I swept this nonsense aside with a roar of rage and ordered him to pick up all the heaviest bits of our luggage and stow them on board. He obeyed with a scowl, and then lapsed into a silence which remained unbroken until at last we were started. He then tapped me on the arm. "Excuse me, sir; but I have not had my breakfast. I should like to stop for a quarter of an hour to have something to eat, as I do not wish to be hungry during the morning." I was so angry that I burst out laughing, and one has to be very angry to do that; but I gave him five minutes' grace, and at the end of it he returned with his mouth full and carrying a bag of monkey nuts, and said that he was now quite ready to leave for Shiraz. Dear George. I loved him.

just as I can't help loving a really naughty child. And he bore me no malice ; and at the gate by which we left—the Isfahan Gate—where the police were terribly tiresome, he was simply splendid and got us through in less than no time.

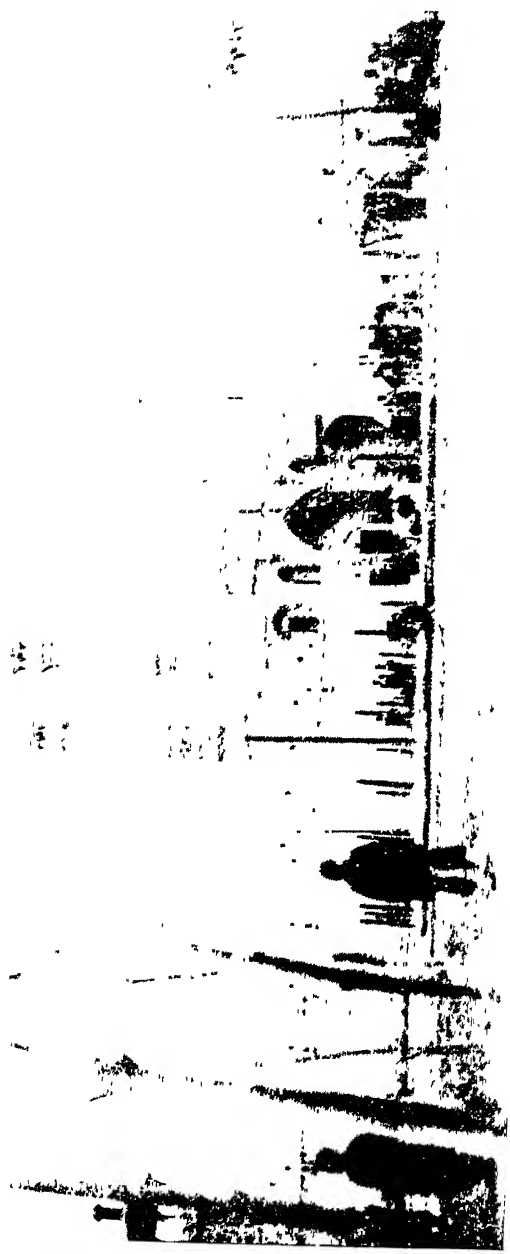
At last we were really away, and at a brisk twenty-eight m.p.h. along a good road we sped past Sultan Abdul Azim and Rhey, and then there was a sharp turn to the right and we were clear of the last fringes of the Teheran oasis and out into wild arid country, treeless, and ridged everywhere with reddish-purple volcanic hills. Our road had a curious history. It was the third of a series of caravan routes between Teheran and Isfahan within recorded history. In the bad old days it was customary for Persian Shahs to give the monopoly of these routes to court favourites, and theirs was the right to build all along the stage a chain of caravanserais in which they could exploit the travelling public for their own benefit. Quite naturally favourites fell from favour and the monopoly passed to others, but not so the existing caravanserais, which remained the possession of the family of the original concessionaire. So each newcomer mapped a new route to put his predecessor's caravanserais out of business, and along it built a new chain of Khans where once again the travelling public could be exploited. The story is eloquent of other days in another Persia. But, whatever its murky past, the road we were on had been marvellously organized for wheeled and animal transport. Every fifteen miles or so were vast decaying caravanserais, some large enough almost to billet a brigade of cavalry, and all were still beautiful—one with a perfect Persian garden of tall poplars and ornamental pools, another with a superb blue-tiled archway rising proudly in the middle of a long vaulted cloister. But their day is over. For here, as elsewhere in the Persia we saw, the lorry is rapidly supplanting the caravans of the past. Indeed, only in Mazanderan and to a lesser extent between Kermanshah and Hamadan did we meet animal convoys at all regularly. Here on the three-hundred-mile stage to Isfahan we passed at most twenty.

It had been fine when we left Teheran, but sixty miles out we were struck by a sharp desert squall, and it was not until we were just on Kum that the sun shone. It couldn't have chosen a happier moment to reappear. Kum lies in a wide plain, and as we descended towards it out of the hills, far ahead of us and glistening bright in the sunlight, we could see the golden dome which stands over the shrine of Fatima el Marsuma—Fatima the Immaculate—to whom Kum owes

RESHT TO ILHERAN A GRANDFATHER AND HIS GRANDSON



KUM IHL MOSQUE OF FAJIMA THE IMMACULATE



its sanctity and within whose mosque, as in the case of the mosque of Shah Abdul Azim, the fugitive miscreant can still enjoy "bast". Fatima was the sister of the Imam Riza, who is buried at Meshed, and according to legend she was poisoned by Haroun-el-Rashid when passing through Kum on her way to join her brother. In the course of time her shrine became, after Meshed, the most important goal of Shiah pilgrimage in Persia, and in other days Kum used to be notorious for its fanaticism. We knew all this ; so all through the muddy outskirts of the town and across its fine bridge, and finally in the square which fronts Fatima's mosque, we drove with almost funereal caution. There we halted, and were at once surrounded by a large crowd. I naturally wanted to take photographs, but we were running no risks. So, seeing a policeman, I sent George to ask permission, adding that if there was any objection he was not to insist, only to say that we quite understood. George laughed, and so did the policeman, who, far from being a fanatic, positively welcomed our arrival as a diversion, and was as proud as anything when we asked him to take us under his wing. And he was almost embarrassingly efficient. When I started to photograph the mosque, he picked up a handful of road metal and threw it at some children who, he said, were spoiling the view.

Naturally we could not get inside the mosque, but our friendly policeman suggested a climb under his chaperonage on to the roof of a public bath just outside the walls, where, he said, we would get a grand "unbeliever's view" of the interior. We were not disappointed. The minarets and domes stood out wonderfully silhouetted against the blue sky, and in front of us was a gem of an archway superbly tiled in the blues and greens and browns which I had come to love so much.

George then asked for permission for a quarter of an hour's grace to say his prayers before Fatima's tomb. We agreed as a reward for his efficiency, and we also thought a little prayer would do him a lot of good. So while he was away we got back into the car and I took out Lord Curzon's book to compare the picture which he took in 1892 with what I was actually seeing myself. The mosque is quite unchanged, but, whereas in Lord Curzon's picture the foreground was an untidy and unhygienic wilderness of Shiah graves, we were now looking at ordered town-planning of the twentieth century—a paved square, and in the middle the beginnings of a public garden, complete with bandstand. Shah Riza Khan again.

Of course, we soon had a crowd around us—mostly of

children, but to start with they hung back, chattering shyly. But eventually, seeing that we were eating chocolate, one of them pushed forward and put his hand out to see if anything was doing. He had a nice naughty face, so we distributed chocolate all round, which was very popular, but when it was all gone and there seemed to be no more forthcoming, they all sauntered away and started a ball game which intrigued us quite as much as the tip-cat at Rhey. There was a wicket and a wicket-keeper and a batsman, but no bowler. The batsman threw the ball into the air for himself and swiped at it, and when he hit it he ran up and down a pitch, and not round a circle of posts as in rounders. When the ball was returned it had to be thrown back to the wicket-keeper, who, if the batsman was out of his ground, knocked down the stones which formed the wicket. I wonder did the Persians teach us cricket as well as polo.

The children's game ended very abruptly. One of the batsmen hit the ball into the middle of a procession which had suddenly emerged with great cheers out of a side street. It was a very odd procession, with a banner in front, and behind a procession of pastrycooks—about ten of them—and on the head of each a long tray covered with a white cloth on which were arranged coloured cone-shaped cakes which reminded me of a great favourite of my childhood, the coconut pyramid. The ball hit the banner-holder, who promptly confiscated it, and then it and the procession proceeded noisily across the square and finally disappeared down another street behind the mosque. Just then George returned—as usual with his mouth full. He may or may not have been praying, but he had certainly been eating. He was quite useless about the pastrycooks. All he could say was that they were men walking about with cakes. But the policeman was encyclopædic in his knowledge. Those cakes were on their way to a marriage feast and the procession was bound for the bride's house, where she was entertaining her girl friends, and then her husband would come to fetch her away, and then . . . and then . . . a wealth of the most thrilling detail of ceremony which George translated with lurid efficiency. In the end I stopped the discourse with a generous tip, and then away we went back through the town and over the bridge, and, swinging into the south, we revelled in five miles of budding orchards and gardens with bee-eaters everywhere and literally scores of magpies—so many in fact, that in the end I got tired of taking off my Irish hat to them.

Kum, in a sense, is half-way house between the steppe-like north and the aridity of the south, and thus enjoys a climate ranging from intense cold in the winter to great heat in the summer. So its inhabitants, like the inhabitants of our own country, have winter and summer clothing. When we were there the men had just got out their summer kit—loose tunics over wide trousers, as shapeless as divided skirts. But once we had left the town and were out of the plain and in the highlands all of the men we passed looked as though they would have been far happier in their winter clothing. It was, as the North African Arab calls it, the "*Bled*"—the twist-and-tween country before the sown yields to utter desert—and down the rocky hillsides swept a searching wind which chilled us and must have frozen them. But the road held good and the cold helped the car, and just as the short twilight merged into moonless darkness we saw the lights of Mehmeh ahead, our midway halt between Kum and Istahan.

From afar the lights looked like the twin headlamps of a monster charabanc, but when we reached them we found that they belonged to the two rival caravanserais of the place. They were rivals in every sense of the word. For, though the proprietors of both were Persian, the caravanserai on the right sold Russian petrol and ours, on the left, the Anglo-Persian product. When we drew up both proprietors were out on the road to entice our custom, and we, of course, went British. Our host had a dirty exterior, but a heart of gold, and at once, to our great satisfaction, started discussing the respective merits of Russia and England "I like English," he said. "I keep English petrol and I use English knives and forks, and I smoke English cigarettes—when I have any." I hastily offered him my case, which made him more Anglophile than ever "The Russians," he went on, "are dirty people and wicked people, and dishonest people Bah!" and he spat heavily and with a strength so vehement that his gobbet ended with a thud on the wall of his rival's caravanserai.

His caravanserai was a dream. Round three sides of a quadrangle about the size of Neville's Court at Trinity, Cambridge, were rows of stalls for the stabling of animals for the night. The fourth wall, which was pierced by a deep-set gate—the only entrance to the place—was in two stories, with watch-towers at either end, and between them, on the first floor, were the guest-rooms. Below on the ground floor on either side of the gate were forage and corn storerooms and the public living-room, a long, whitewashed vault of a building

with divans round the walls and in the middle, by a table loaded with samovars great and small, a glowing brazier. The divans were all carpeted, and more carpets were hung as decorations on the walls. But mine host would not hear of our going into the ordinary guest-rooms. "I have two special rooms," he said, "opening, not into the quadrangle, but on to the desert, where you will be quieter and more comfortable." They were most romantic. The roofs were arched and a door and two little shuttered lancet windows opened on to the south. He put down a good carpet in each and gave each of us a brazier and a lamp. We couldn't have been more comfortable. But the floating populations of caravanserais are notoriously light-fingered, so, instead of parking the lorry in the quadrangle, we drew it up outside our quarters, cleared everything out of the rumble, and made a fine bed inside for George, the watchdog.

Meanwhile the caravanserai had begun to fill up. Lorries arrived; two post-buses, laden and noisy; country carts with wheels as tall as a full-grown man; donkey caravans; camel caravans; horse caravans; and from our rooms we could hear faintly through the walls the noise of the settling-in for the night. It was the real come-and-go of nomadic life, and, for all our camp beds and luxuries, we too felt nomads and very content. After supper we tucked George into the rumble with all our spare blankets and coats, and the two of us sat outside our rooms on chairs. Gradually, one after another, the lights were extinguished and the noises of man and beast died away; and eventually a great stillness, the stillness of the desert, ebbed up to our feet, and finally engulfed us. We took the hint and turned in, and just before I went to sleep I remember thinking to myself that never since the days when I was on Gallipoli, had I felt more that I had not the slightest idea where I was.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ISFAHAN

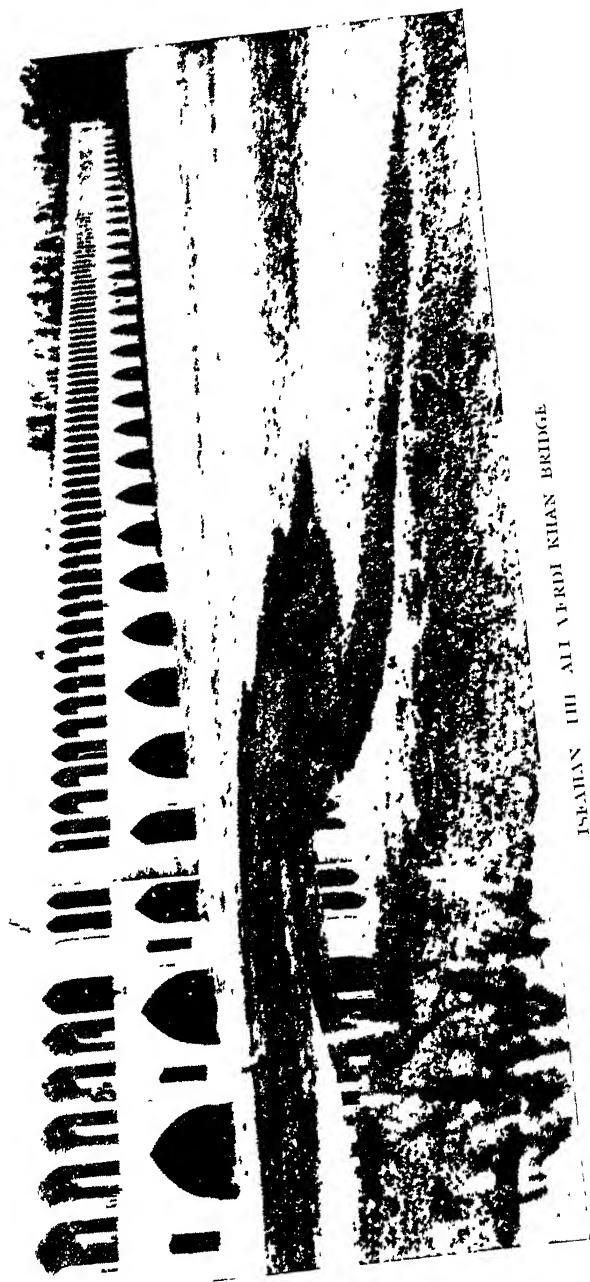
PERSIA has had many capitals in its day, for, as in Abyssinia, it was customary for the founder of a new dynasty to build a new capital to celebrate his accession to power. Until 150 years ago, when the Kajars, after ousting the Sefavis, settled themselves in Teheran, Isfahan was the capital of the country. It was founded by the Sefavi Shah, Abbas the Great, who ruled in Persia about the same time as our Elizabeth ruled this country, and his choice of the previously unimportant hamlet of Isfahan was on two accounts. Its situation was conveniently central; and, secondly, it stood on the banks of the Zender Rud (River Zender) which, rising in the Bakhtiari mountains, had a fine flow which survived for nine months out of the twelve. Shah Abbas was the ideal monarch to create a new capital for his country. Not only was he a fine town-planner on vast and sensible lines, but he was always a true artist, and in the pursuit of his ideas of beauty he engaged the best of foreign talent to help him in his creation. The result was Isfahan. And although to-day it is politically eclipsed by Teheran, it still stands supreme as artistically the most beautiful and historically the most interesting town in Persia.

We approached it from the north, and suddenly the desert ended and our road lay between green fields irrigated by tiny channels of water; and past the suburbs we found a town which had escaped the crudeness of twentieth-century Persian innovation and was still of the Middle Ages. But of the Middle Ages at its best. Our hotel stood in the Chahar Bagh—the Champs Élysées of Isfahan. It has two roadways, for up and down traffic, and in the centre is a long, wide avenue flanked by neat irrigation channels and shaded by regular rows of high pollarded poplars. And here the Isfahani takes his siesta at midday, and in the afternoon all the youth and beauty of the town use it as their promenade until the stars come out.

After we had settled ourselves into our quarters, which were excellent, we left the lorry at a neighbouring garage, which was also excellent, and joined the promenading throng enjoying the cool of the afternoon. Our walk led us down the avenue to the river, and there we found the curious bridge of Ali Verdi Khan, one of five which connect the two banks. It was built by Shah Abbas, and the only parallel which suggests itself to me as a means to convey in words some idea of its odd structure, is to compare it with one of the tubular bridges which were so popular a feature in Victorian railway construction. Where the rails would run is the thoroughfare for wheeled traffic—a roadway some fifteen yards wide, flanked on either side with formidable stone walls pierced every now and then by archways which are leading on to covered colonnades, reserved for pedestrians. The whole structure is supported on a long series of narrow archways and is to-day as competent to meet the demands of the heaviest traffic as it ever was in the time of Shah Abbas.

On our way back to the hotel we stopped almost opposite our door to visit the Madrassah of Shah Hussein, a great religious seminary which was originally founded by the Dervishes. The entrance is through a deep archway, roofed in perfect honeycomb tracery ; but as we passed through we might have been in a bazaar, for on either side were trestle-stands behind which vendors of cakes and sweetmeats and nuts hawked their wares. Past them, however, perfect peace reigned, and we stood looking down a walled quadrangle spaced with paths in the design of St. George's Cross. Down them were planted the inevitable poplars of Persia, and in the centre was a hexagonal pool of water. The walls all round were two-storied and contained the classrooms and living-rooms of the students, opening out of wide-arched cloisters ; and midway in each wall stood a great square-faced *aiwan* (arch), beautifully tiled in blues and greens, and rising high above the main level of the buildings.

Behind the southern wall was the mosque. We naturally could not enter, but from the courtyard below we had a view of its peacock-blue dome—a beautiful view, and a view which once again emphasized what Shah Riza is doing for Persia. Under the Kajars, it and the Madrassah in general had been allowed to fall into sad disrepair ; but as we saw it, the dome was surrounded with scaffolding, and the Persian workmen who were repairing and replacing the tiles, were just packing up before breaking off for the day. Shah Riza has declared the



ISFAHAN III ALI VERDI KHAN BRIDGE



ISFAHAN IHL GREAT MIDAN AND IHL ALI KAPU PALACE

building to be a national monument and has subscribed generously from his private purse towards the fund for its restoration, and that of many other similarly dilapidated buildings.

There was still light, and before we retired to the hotel we collected George and with him went into the bazaars. They stand at the northern end of the Great Midan of Isfahan round which Shah Abbas concentrated most of his great buildings, and we entered through another splendid *airwan* and were at once plunged into cathedral gloom. Above the wide roadway the dark walls rose high over our heads, ending in a slender pointed arch, and on either side the merchants were shuttering down their niches of shops for the day. So ours was merely a voyage of exploration. But it was not fruitless. We reached a cross-roads and found that the arcade to our right was blocked to us by an enormous white sheet slung between the two walls and reaching down to the road level. From behind it we could hear the droning singsong of a speaker, and when the sheet was pulled aside for a moment to admit a passer-by we saw that the ground was crowded with sitting men and women, all silent and listening to the speaker. He was a professional story-teller, and George came back to tell us that he was narrating the tale of the death of Hussein at the hands of the wicked Shem.

We turned back in our tracks down the opposite arcade, and suddenly, through a tiny arched opening, we saw an oil-mill at work. We went inside. Imagine a high barnlike building, dimly lit through cobwebbed roofs and patterned crazily with innumerable beams and cross-beams. The high walls were dark brown, filthy and oily, but absolutely mellow; and in the middle three huge millstones lay flat on the earthen floor, each heaped with the sesame pulp. Above them the upper millstones revolved slowly as three huge camels, one to each mill, padded round and round, relentlessly and patiently; and as stone met stone the oil oozed out of the seed and trickled into circular channels all round. It was an almost ghostly scene in the dim light. The camels walked silently; the stones turned silently; even the blue-gowned, semi-naked attendants were, for them, strangely silent. It was all impressive—a picture to which Gustave Doré alone could have done justice.

Next morning I was back again in the bazaars, but this time to shop with George. He hated shopping with me, and I am not surprised. Our Isfahan experiences were typical of what always happened on these expeditions. Word had gone

round that a rich Englishman was buying, and seemingly every carpet merchant in the town had his scouts out. Every scout had at least four carpets slung over his shoulder, and as soon as we stopped for any reason, all hurled their carpets with horrid dexterity at our feet and bombarded poor George for my patronage. And, as I was a buyer, of course I inspected. But as soon as I showed any inclination, out would come the most fantastic prices, and then I shook my head and poor George shouted and they shouted. But George always won, for I was buying on a programme as fixed as the laws of the Medes and Persians themselves.

I was no expert, so I had laid it down that I would never spend more than one pound on any carpet, so that even if I bought a bad one it wouldn't cost me much. But I bought regularly, one carpet in every carpet-town we visited. For I had in mind a room in some house where I would pass the end of my days, which would be rugged in a sequence of carpets illustrating the progress of our Persian journey; and, if I may anticipate events, when I got back to Baghdad, I was able to strew all my carpets in a row on the lawn of the house where I was staying, and, as I walked from one to another, explain just as clearly as if I had been working on a map the general drift of our route. As a scheme it was diverting, and when it was explained to the merchants it invariably helped a bargain. For they quickly became as intrigued in it as I was myself.

But the carpet-market is desperately depressed. We were dawdling along, when I was suddenly greeted by name, and, turning round, I found an old carpet-merchant whom I had last seen in Cairo years ago. He must have had a very good memory. He was insistent that I should visit him, and late in the same day he fetched me from the hotel and we drove off through tiny, smelly, mud-walled streets past Tamerlane's mosque with its solitary black marble lion gazing sadly into a blank wall with its tail towards the roadway, past the Friday Mosque, the *Mesjid el Goma*, and so into the Jewish quarter and to my friend's house. I bought my carpet from him, and, though he was quite polite, he was very disappointed about my price. He had hoped for a good deal. But when he realized that I too was poor, he suddenly opened his heart to me about himself. On paper he was a very rich man, with a stock of £20,000 worth of carpets, but the demand had absolutely stopped, and his carpets were as much use to him as blotting-paper, and at the moment he was actually hard

put to find cash to pay his rent. No one would buy anything from Persia so long as Persia monkeyed about with trade and currency restrictions.

Between our shopping expeditions we had paid a visit to the Armenian settlement of Julfa, which lies across the Zender Rud. The Armenians were planted here by Abbas the Great much in the same way and about the same time as James I planted his Protestant colonies in Ulster. The Shah took his Armenian colonists from the Julfa districts of Azerbaijan, and with a twofold object. No longer would they be valuable recruits for a hostile Turkish army, and, apart from this, Abbas wanted to develop a commercial life in his new capital, and no one would do this better than the commercially minded Armenian. For nearly a hundred and fifty years the colony thrived, preserving its national customs and religion; but eventually it fell into royal disfavour, partly on account of its envied prosperity, partly following a trumped-up charge that during an Afghan invasion the Armenians had sympathized with the Shah's enemies. In any case, a reign of persecution began, with the result that a general exodus of the colonists took place to Baghdad and India and the Caucasus, leaving a greatly reduced population which rapidly dwindled into stagnation.

But the community has survived, and Julfa has preserved an atmosphere quite of its own. To reach it we crossed the Ali Verdi Khan bridge and were soon threading our way through the twisting whitewashed streets of the little township; and to our surprise we found really excellent shops which were mainly stocked with English goods. For until the Anglo-Indian Telegraph organization was taken over by the Persian Government, all the local officials of the Company lived and shopped in Julfa. At the time of our visit the colony was officially in bad odour, as the Armenian Bishop of Julfa had just been deported. He had become tainted with Sovietic propaganda from Armenia proper, and had apparently engaged himself as an agent of Soviet doctrines in Persia, and when he was arrested masses of propaganda literature had been found in his house. So at the moment Julfa had no bishop in residence.

The cathedral stands in the middle of the colony, and, although recently renovated, still preserves the general plan of its building, which was assisted by Shah Abbas himself. From without it has the appearance of a typical mosque of Isfahan. A graceful dome surmounts the chancel, and the

outside walls are arched and decorated in the Persian style of the days of Shah Abbas; but within, the atmosphere is entirely that of Eastern Christendom. We were greeted on our arrival by a charming old priest who spoke English well, and, after showing us the graves in the small cemetery outside the cathedral, he conducted us within. It is a small building, but so beautifully proportioned that it gives the illusion of great size. The floor is richly carpeted and the walls are covered with seventeenth-century paintings, of which two remain vividly in my mind—the Tower of Babel and the Inferno. The latter is most entertaining, and the faces of the devils in Hell, who are dealing most efficiently with the sinners of this world, could not be more sardonic. The vaulted ceiling is painted in a tendril design of blue and gold, and reaching six feet above the level of the floor is a dado of perfect Persian tiling. But above all remarkable was the cleanliness of the place. It was absolutely spick and span—a great contrast to the normal condition of the Shi'ah buildings which we had already seen and were still to see.

There was a second building within the cathedral precincts, the museum, which was also beautifully kept, and here the old priest showed us illuminated missals, the first printed works of the colony, the episcopal vestments, porcelain, wood carvings, and, above all, pictures. I took away from Julfa one great memory. Hung in a small room by itself was a Madonna of the French school, and her smile was for me far more sympathetic and beautiful than that of Mona Lisa.

We drove back to Isfahan by a new route across the second historic bridge—the Pul-i-Khaju—over the Zender Rud. It was built by a Sefavi Shah after Abbas the Great, and is perhaps odder even than the Ali Verdi Khan. From the river level it looks more like a row of buildings than a bridge—perhaps just a little like old London bridge used to be. Its wide roadway runs between high walls, and on either side are rows of cubicles like bathing-boxes, opening on to the footway for pedestrians, and in the centre and at either end there are wide-angled bays breaking the straight line of the design. In essence it is as much a dam as it is a bridge, for between the arched piers the water flows over a masoned spillway to tumble down long flights of steps to the lower level to the north, and, as in the case of Ali Verdi Khan, it has stood the test of time remarkably, and is still in excellent repair. Apart from its utility as a dam and as a roadway, it

is in the spring-time, when the floods are high, a popular resort of the Isfahani, and on holidays the custom is for whole families to leave their houses and settle in the cubicles for the day. Coffee-shop proprietors establish themselves in the big bays to supply water for the family samovars, and everybody sits out in the sun watching the water roar through the arches and over the stairways in cataracts. Once seen, these two great bridges of Isfahan are never forgotten.

Our stay quickly and naturally developed into a round of sightseeing, and every day paid us a rich dividend. For in Isfahan sightseeing is not only pleasant, but, thanks to Shah Abbas' wise town-planning, comparatively easy. All our expeditions seemed to start and end in the Great Midan, which he built as the centre of his capital, and round it are concentrated the main monuments of old Isfahan. We saw them all, and under perfect direction For Jamshid Khan of Isfahan was the best guide I had ever known. And the secret of his genius was that he loved his town and that he had the wit never to be prosy or academic. In fact, sightseeing with him was actually exciting and jolly. And if in my account of what we saw I am prosy and academic, I can assure you that the fault is mine, not Jamshid Khan's.

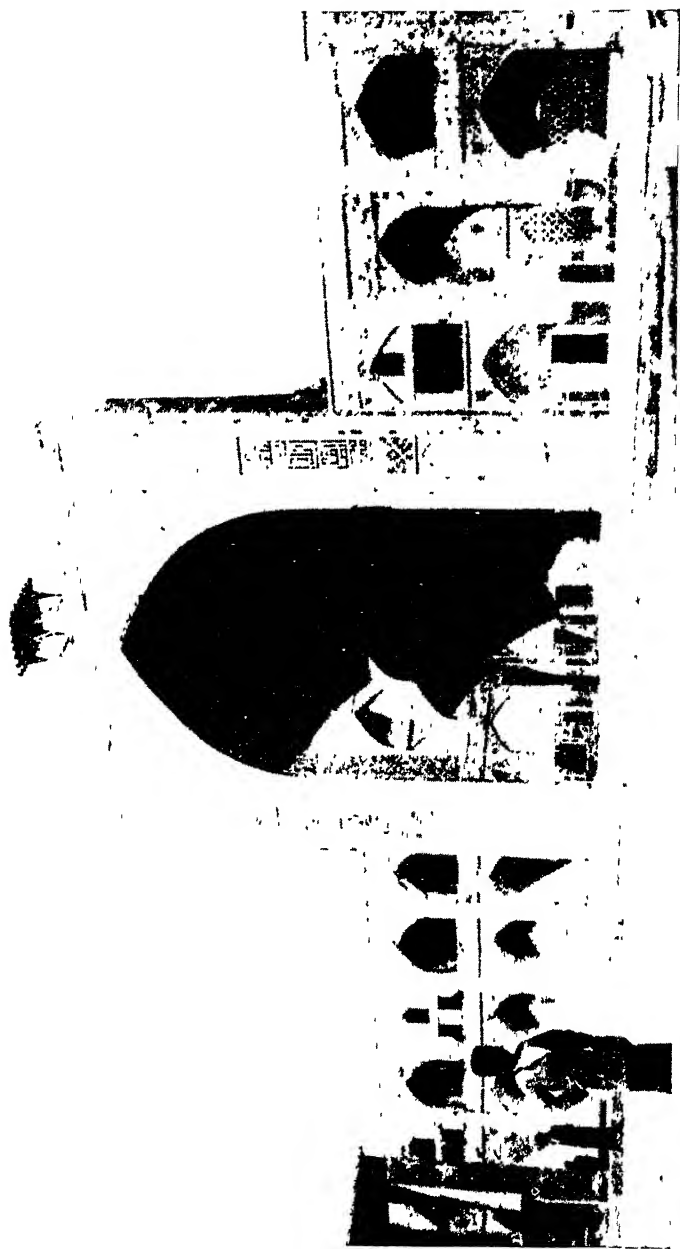
The Great Midan itself was easily the largest open town-space I had ever seen. It is a parallelogram a third of a mile long and a furlong across, and, though it is now split by transverse roadways and disfigured by the anachronisms of telegraph posts, it still has the stamp of that spaciousness which we associate with the days of Elizabeth, when it was designed. Half-way down its colonnaded western wall stands Shah Abbas' Palace, the Ali Kapu. We entered under a fine arch, which in other days was so sacred that the Shah himself descended from his horse when passing under it, then up a narrow winding stairway and through several empty white-washed rooms which had been the State apartments, and out finally on to the wide verandahed terrace overlooking the Midan. The roof, a heavily eaved wooden canopy of almost Chinese appearance, is supported on tall tapering wooden pillars, and under it the Shah with his court used to sit on his throne watching the élite of his nobility playing polo in the Midan below. For polo was invented in Persia.

Then down again into the Midan and on to the Musjid es Shah (the Shah's Mosque), which occupies all of the southern wall. My permit to visit it stipulated a police escort, and when we left Ali Kapu we had a policeman with us who raised

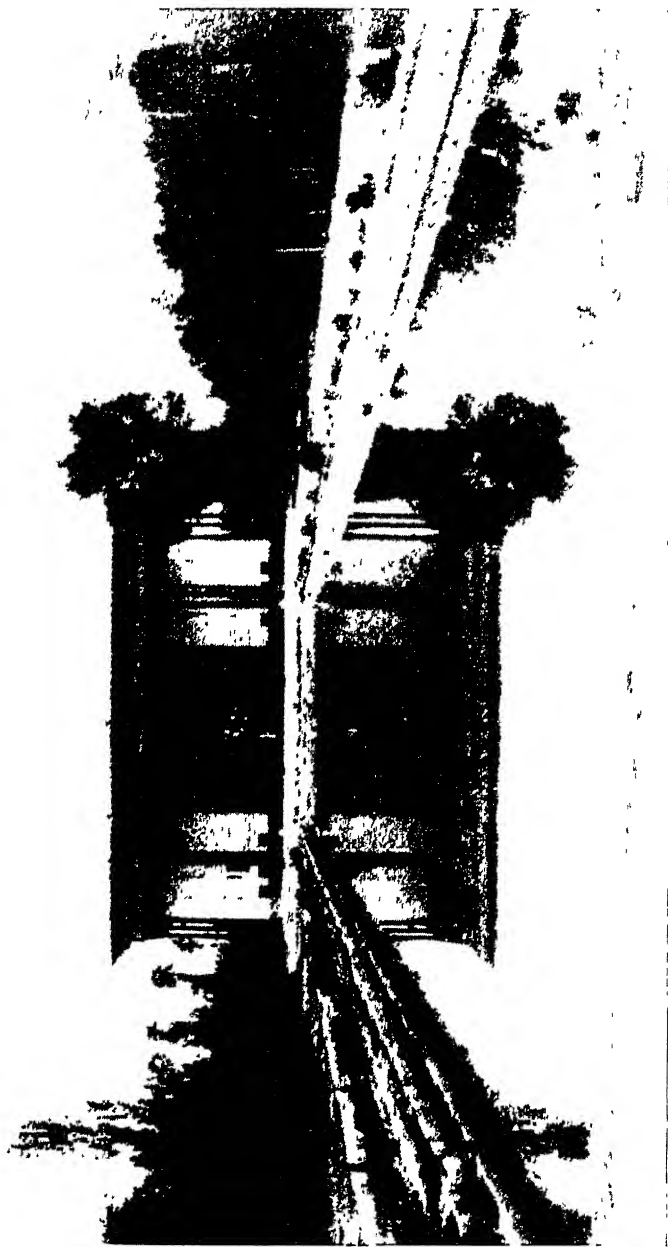
no objection to my taking photographs of whatever I wanted, which was grand. The mosque is superb. The main entrance is naturally far more impressive than the reduced facsimile which was shown in the Persian Exhibition in London in 1931, and past it we made our way under a series of arches into the big quadrangle. It was lovely, but also sadly depressing. The dirt and dilapidation was indescribable. Dust and grime coated the beautiful tiles, the pavements were littered and unswept, the alabaster pediments of the pillars and walls were covered with pencil writing and obscene drawings, and every corridor was noisomely polluted. But sadder still was the dilapidation. Everywhere there were unsightly gaps in the tiling, some the outcome of neglect and decay, others of wanton vandalism, where whole blocks of tiles had been hacked and wrenched out of their setting. Apparently the later Kajars were quite indifferent to the care of historic and religious monuments, and in time the demand from the markets of America and Europe created an illicit trade in the tiles. This desecration used to take place by stealth. Men would arrive at sunset with their sleeping-gear, ostensibly to pass a night of prayer and meditation in the mosque; but when all was quiet, having squared the watchmen, out of their bedding would come crowbars and hammers and chisels, and next morning they would smuggle their ill-gotten booty out with their bedding.

The damage done is irremediable and a terrible slur on Persia; and yet, despite vandalism and decay, nothing could exceed the beauty of what I saw. For Persian architecture is the perfect setting for Persian tiles, just as Persian tiles are the perfect decoration of Persian architecture. The great quadrangle, like that of the Madrasah es Shah Hussein, is colonnaded in two stories with lofty *arwans* set in each wall. Their tiling must have been magnificent before it was neglected and desecrated, and the honeycomb tracery of their interiors is quite perfect. Above one is a jarring candle-extinguisher erection. It is the *muezzin's* platform, and thereby hangs a tale. The original design of the mosque included two proper minarets, but when they had been built it was discovered that from the platforms the *muezzins* had an uninterrupted view of the Imperial Harem gardens, and at once Shah Abbas ordered the discontinuation of their use.

I left the mosque with real anger in my heart. Nothing can repair it, though Shah Riza is doing his best, and those



ISFAHAN THE MOSJID ES SHAH (SHAH'S MOSQUE)



ISFAHAN THE HALL OF THE FORTY PILLARS

who have made money out of this wanton destruction merit all the punishments of the damned.

The Lotfollah Mosque, which stands directly opposite the Ali Kapu Palace on the eastern side of the Midan, has suffered even more. Its interior was profusely tiled throughout—the walls, the domes, the alcoves, and the long corridors—and even to-day the colours and the patterns are brilliant. But this brilliance only serves to accentuate the horrors of those vandals' activities. But what has survived is now at any rate safe, for by the Shah's orders the mosque is now closed and repairs are being slowly undertaken.

Behind Ali Kapu and between it and the Chahar Bagh are more dynastic monuments, but many are now in utter ruin owing to disuse, and we only visited the Chehel Situm—the Hall of the Forty Pillars. It owes its charm to its situation. It stands in a large garden, and in front of its pillared verandah is a long pool stretching some forty yards down to the arched entrance. It was brimming with water, and with the sun behind us it gave a perfect reflection of the building. The roof, like the canopy above the terrace of the Ali Kapu, is Chinese in appearance, though even more heavily carved, and is supported by black wooden pillars, some of which, in their turn, rest on the backs of jolly solid-looking lions. And here again Shah Riza is to the fore. Attached to the pillars are tin receptacles for cigarette-ends—the only evidence I have ever seen in the East of any signs of an "anti-litter" campaign.

The hall was used mainly for official receptions, and its two main apartments are a Throne Room, which is highly ornate but not very sympathetic to modern taste, and behind it the Picture Gallery, which contains the largest pictures I have ever seen in the East. They are great fun—crammed with crude detail and stiffly vivid, especially the scene of a royal carouse, which was certainly a very good party. But planted among these very Persian masterpieces is one horrid anachronism—a dreary late nineteenth-century portrait of Shah Nasruddin, who visited London. He was a great and respected Shah and the first to visit England, and when he returned the reports of his success at the English Court went so far as to state that the widowed Queen Victoria had fallen in love with his moustaches (to which the portrait did the fullest justice) and had suggested a Royal Alliance.

For one reason or another—probably laziness—I left the Musjid el Goma (the Friday Mosque) to the end. It is the

senior of the Isfahan mosques, and, though it has had to yield pride of place to the more magnificent and more central Musjid es Shah, it is still the most popular fane in the hearts of the Isfahanis. It lies well to the north-east of the Great Midan in the poorer quarters of the town, and long before we reached it I saw the square-tiled cornices of its *arwans* towering about the flat-roofed world around it. But when we arrived, all majesty, all beauty, faded among conditions of decay which completely eclipsed my former experiences. The place was not merely dilapidated, it was tumbling to ruin; such ruin, indeed, that the efforts of some of Shah Rıza's workmen to piece together a fallen stone-traced window seemed merely pathetic. In the other mosques the deterioration has been arrested, and for the time being they are safe. The Musjid el Goma has gone far beyond repair. Only reconstruction could restore its former beauty.

On our way back to the hotel I had proof that the carpet trade was not the only depressed industry in Isfahan. We met a hen-merchant carrying three bunches of panting birds upside down by the legs in each hand. Rather than have the trouble of taking them back to his village, he offered me the lot at a flat rate of 1½d. a hen.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ISFAHAN TO SHIRAZ

SEEN from the high hills to the south, Isfahan revealed itself as an oasis pure and simple. Beyond the high-walled gardens on the outskirts of the town our road south to Shiraz started climbing at once. At first there were a few clumps of stunted trees ; then we were above the tree-line and out among boulders and grotesque rock outcrops ; and, finally, a thousand feet above the plain of Isfahan, we topped a mountain ridge and had our last look at the old capital. Below, stretching wide across the flatness, lay a well-defined lozenge of green trees and white houses and walls, broken here and there by the turquoise blue tiling of domes and minarets. And all round—north, south, east, and west—was nothing but empty pink and brown desert, totally devoid of all cultivation and vegetation. We were now really in the desert belt.

For an hour our road twisted its way stolidly among crude volcanic mountain formations which, in the morning sun, cast the oddest of irregular shadows far across the sand ; and then followed the even greater monotony of the first of the many dreary plains which we were to cross that day. But it was more the straightness of our road than the aridity of the desert which made life so dreary. They say that hens become mesmerized if you draw a chalk-line away from their beaks along a flat board. For us the roads which we were now on were quite as demoralizing. From the bonnet of the lorry they stretched dead straight for miles, and even when they did change direction the angle was so slight that we only knew that we had turned a corner when, looking back, we found that our first road was now out of the true. Thank goodness we were not walking. The pedestrian of other days must have walked himself into a coma.

But in those days the road was not so uneventful as we were finding it. We could travel without any qualms at all—

so much so that never once did it cross our minds to be apprehensive for our personal safety. But already it was patent that this Isfahan-Shiraz stage had in other days been unpleasantly exciting. The rare villages were walled and turreted like fortresses; there was an almost unbroken string of police posts within signalling distances one of another—some perched on hilltops, others squatting blankly in the middle of a plain—and each little station had its sentry-box on the roof, and as we passed, we saw more than one heliograph message being flashed down the line, and, whether or not they had anything to do with our movements, always we knew that we were under the protecting eye of Shah Riza, and both of us were duly grateful.

This system of police supervision is a thing of his own creation. In the old days travellers always moved in armed companies with the probability, rather than the possibility, of an attack by bandits. To suppress this lawlessness other Persian Governments had evolved no other alternative than organized military action. But the bandits were past-masters of guerilla warfare, and, like Osman Digna of the Sudan, they ran away and lived to fight another day. But Shah Riza has known how to counter these tactics. His block-house system—modelled on Lord Kitchener's South African scheme—defends rather than attacks, and for the time being, at any rate, banditry is in eclipse.

But certain stages of the road are still terribly lonely. Forty miles south of Isfahan we were driving under a long, low range of broken hills where we found a very dilapidated touring car drawn up just off the track. A man was lying asleep between the front wheels, but he woke as we passed and waved his arms feebly. We stopped at once, to find that he was a boy of not more than fifteen years old, with his eyes sunk into his head and his voice weak and hollow. Four days previously the car in which he was travelling—as a paying passenger, mark you—had broken down, and the owner and the chauffeur had departed for help, leaving him on guard, and when we found him he had no food left and was drinking the water out of the radiator. For the first two days he had waited in patience, but since then only two cars had passed and neither had stopped. We took him on board willingly and gave him food and water, and dropped him at the next village where there was a police post.

And so on and on, hills and plains, plains and hills, but a really good road and good progress and an entertaining life



THE PERSIAN DESERT SOUTH OF ISFAHAN



VEZD-I-KHVAST

"IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DEPRESSION STOOD A TOWERING OUTCROP OF ROCK POINTED LIKE A SPEARHEAD"

in the villages to relieve the monotony. All the men wore the wide baggy trousers we had seen at Kum, but the women were now different. In Isfahan we had noticed that under their long, all-enveloping shrouds the ladies had worn what our great grandmothers used to call "pantalettes"—long, bunchy drawers tied just above the shoes. Here, however, the ladies wore neither shrouds nor pantalettes, but voluminous Victorian bloomers, unskirted and plain for anyone to see; but they incidentally gave a most attractive swing to their gait.

And then we had the thrill of Yezd-i-Khvast. We were driving blankly into what looked like unbroken flatness, when we suddenly spotted ahead of us some jagged rocks rising just above the level of the plain. Next we drew up almost sharply. Below us gaped one of those freakish geological desert formations, a crack in the surface of the earth, the like of which on a grander scale I have seen in the Great Rift in Kenya and in the valley of the Jordan. We were looking down three hundred odd feet into a wide depression, and in the middle of this depression stood a towering outcrop of rock pointed like a spearhead, and on its summit, like so many swallows' nests, clung the verandahed houses of the village of Yezd-i-Khvast. As far as we could ascertain, the place has only geological interest, but it looked a perfect suicides' paradise, and we asked a shopman from whom we were buying some bread whether life in those airy perches was not dangerous, especially for children. His answer was very matter of fact. "Oh yes, numbers of children fall and are killed every year down the rocks. But what matter? Everyone has to die once, and when a child dies young, there is always the consolation that he has cost his parents less. *Allah Karim*" ("God is merciful").

The early afternoon was deadly dull; for by then the desert had got badly on our nerves; and we gladly welcomed the diversion of a policeman passenger who wanted a lift to the next post. He was a most friendly type, and no sooner had he learned from George of our travels and our plans than he wholeheartedly offered us his services as escort throughout, and, indeed, when we put him down to go about his proper purposes he was quite ruffled that we had not accepted his offer. Further on we met more police, patrolling between the posts in most workmanlike fashion, and finally we overtook a large mounted troop which had been chasing robbers. They had made a good haul. Four dejected-looking

prisoners pattered along dismally tied by the wrist to a policeman's stirrup, and with them some fifteen donkeys loaded with packages of confiscated rifles. This was concrete evidence of the efficiency of Riza Khan's methods.

Gradually, as the afternoon waned, the altitude decreased ; and finally, having negotiated an easy gradient and a dull pass, we began to drop rapidly, and at once all monotony vanished. Steep hills rose on either side of us ; there were more and more villages ; the country became greener and greener ; and eventually we were driving along a fine river with trees on both sides of our road and grass fields and slopes. We revelled in it, and just before night descended for good we rolled into a squat mud-walled village called Sivend, climbing in flat-roofed tiers up the hillside.

The caravanserai-keeper had not had a visitor for days and was delighted to see us, and gave us good fires and two dozen of eggs, and after a grand supper we went out up the hill under a waxing moon. All round towered a ring of cold, heavily shadowed mountains ; back in the valley by the river bed the frogs were croaking themselves to bursting-point ; and later, just as I was falling off to sleep, a *bulbul* (nightingale) opened up in a lilac bush just outside the caravanserai wall. He sang perfectly, trilling and jugging as though his heart would break, and when I woke at one, and again at four, he was still singing, and both times I had to stay awake awhile to listen to his indefatigable song.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SHIRAZ (PART I)

FROM Sivend it was only a matter of fifty miles to Shiraz, and the thrill of Persepolis awaited us midway. But in the end, so far as Persepolis was concerned, the day was an anticlimax. Almost at once our road cleared the mountains, and with the great plain of Mervdhasht stretching away into the south we skirted the contours of the hills to the north, and thus almost before we knew it we were at Persepolis. But our approach had been from the side, which was all wrong. All we saw was a foreshortened view of a few columns peering above the blank face of a stone platform. It was a horrid disappointment. And then both of us had the inspiration of our lives. This was no way to see Persepolis. We must see it from the south. And there and then we decided to postpone our visit to our return from Shiraz. Below the ruins our road turned right-angled into the south, and when I looked back over my shoulder I knew how right had been our decision. I saw Persepolis as every traveller ought to see it and as we —*Insha'allah*—would see it two days hence.

And after anticlimax, tragedy. Our road was straight and apparently smooth, and, as men will at the end of a long and tiring stage, we drove too fast, and before we could check we had charged headlong into an enormous pothole and bang went our front spring. We shored it up with chocks of wood as best we could, and crawled on painfully and gingerly across the plain which ten minutes before had seemed so wonderful. Now it was a nightmare. And then it began to rain; and the rain was followed by a biting wind; and then one of the chocks shifted, just where there was no vestige of shelter either from the rain or the wind. We cursed and swore and then lapsed into gloomy silence.

Beyond the plain conditions were even worse. We had two dreary ranges of hills to negotiate where the track was as stony and disagreeable as any we had met in Persia, and

all the time we were haunted with the fear that the spring would collapse entirely and we would suffer the humiliation of rescue. But Roy remained master of a touchy situation and drove beautifully, and, although we took an hour and a half to cover the remaining seventeen miles, in the end all was well and at last, through a gap in the hills, we saw Shiraz itself in a misty distance, sprawling wide across its well-watered plain. Both of us in unison exclaimed, "Thank God", and that was exactly what every traveller throughout the ages has exclaimed in his relief at seeing Shiraz after the seventeen days' stage through the bandit-infested country south of Isfahan. And this expression of gratitude to the Almighty has been fitly immortalized in stone. The gateway by which we entered Shiraz is called *Teng-i-Allahu-el-Akhbar*—the Gate of God the Omnipotent.

Sitting on a low wall just inside the gate was a nonagenarian beggar who with one hand was eating beans out of a porringer while with the other he investigated animal life in the folds of his filthy clothes. But our interest was mainly in his headdress. It was not a "Pahlevi", but a very dirty white turban, and when George returned from a parley with the police control within the gate, we asked him to explain. He eyed the beggar with disgust. "I suppose he claims relationship with the families of the Imams," he said, "which entitles him to his turban. But these Imamlic privileges are all rubbish. To-day people claim them who couldn't tell you the names of four out of the twelve Imams." From the gateway we had to drive a mile and a half along a wide untidy road before we reached the town proper, and there, after much casting around, we found first the Imperial Bank of Persia, then the garage, where to our great relief there was a most efficient mechanic, and finally the Hotel Fars, where we were given excellent rooms overlooking a boulevard twice as wide as Regent Street, and as empty as the Cromwell Road at three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Obviously the New Persian town-planner had been trying his hand in Shiraz.

Shiraz is the capital of the Province of Fars, from which Persia takes its geographical name, and it is still the most important town in South Persia. Nevertheless, not only does it lack true historic and architectural interest, but, like Isfahan, it is haunted with the atmosphere of a glory which has departed. Under the Sefavi Dynasty it was a magnificent town, walled and fortified and adorned with buildings of distinction; but with the advent of the Kajars the place was razed to

the ground with such thoroughness that of the former fortifications little remains save the citadel in the centre of the town. It is a fine whitewashed building, facing on to the chief Midan, and over the gateway survives a vast crudely coloured bas-relief depicting two gigantic figures which George told us represented Persian heroes of the past. Incidentally it was the only coloured bas-relief we saw all the time we were in the country.

But, despite its lack of distinction, we were far from dull in Shiraz. We went sightseeing, we shopped, and we talked. On the whole the shopping was a failure, but the bazaars where we shopped were wonderful. The chief bazaar is called the *Bazaar-i-Vekil*, the Regent's Bazaar, and is the finest in Persia. Arched over a roadway some seventy feet wide, and stretching straight for a distance of over five hundred yards, rises a towering roof of brownish yellow brick, and both sides of the arcade are solid rows of deeply recessed niches which are the shops; and when the merchants knew that I was looking for carpets, we became at once the centre of a surging mob of vendors, jostling and yelling and fighting. But the news that I was walking abroad had also spread to the beggars, and never in any town in the world—not even in pre-war Naples—have I seen more or nastier beggars than the Shirazi bazaars produced. One man I shall never forget. I was haggling over a Baluchi rug, when suddenly through the buzz and chatter of the crowd around me I heard loud and monotonously the following refrain:

"I, I; a.m, am; a, a; p.o.o.r, poor; m.a.n, man; y.o.u, you; a.r.e, are; a, a; r.i.c.h, rich; m.a.n, man."

I looked round to see whence in Shiraz this odd English patter emanated, and saw a bundle of rags balanced on a crutch. And not one other solitary word of English did the man know. Was he a derelict from our South Persian Rifles of the war?

The Shirazi carpet is world-famous; and it was a Shirazi that my little carpenter friend of Cairo, Mohamed Mohamed Omar, had stipulated for his wife's *salon* when he gave me the £10. But he had also given me the dimensions of the *salon*, and nowhere could I find anything large enough at the price. I really tried, and we toured dozens of shops, but all in vain; and I was horribly disappointed, as I knew how disappointed he would be.

But from my own point of view my search was not a waste of time. One of the leading carpet-manufacturers,

whose store I had ransacked, invited me later to visit his workrooms. I went, and loathed it. The carpets which he was making were lovely; but the conditions under which they were woven were quite repulsive. There were in all eight looms, the webbing reaching from floor to ceiling. Each loom was in a separate room, but all the rooms were intolerably small, stuffy, smelly and dusty. And behind each loom, with their poor little pale faces pressed close against the webbing, were squatting rows of tiny children—mostly girls—the eldest of whom was not more than seven years old. Behind them in racks on the wall were the spools of the various coloured wools. They fed to the children's fingers, and those tiny fingers positively flew, threading the wool, knotting it, and then cutting with a knife. In each room was a black-board on which was pinned a large sheet of squared paper. On it was drawn the pattern of the design, and in front of each stood a master, who read the pattern aloud to the children, giving the detail of the colour and the number of knots to the inch; and as he shouted, the children repeated his instructions in the shrillest of shrill voices. And they worked and worked. They do nine sedentary hours a day and receive a daily wage of 2½d. I thought of Tom in Kingsley's *Water Babies*, who swept chimneys because he was so tiny that he could creep up the flues. These children, like Tom, are valuable because they too are tiny. For when it is a question of making the finest carpets with the closest weave and the greatest number of knots, it is tiny fingers which are required; for grown-up fingers would only tousle and break, where they can thread and knot with ease. Poor little babies; condemned to a frightful existence of sweated labour! And yet they did not seem unhappy. Nor did these tiny tots of girls ever forget their sex. When we came into the rooms, even the smallest of them picked up her shawl and drew it closely across her face to shield it from masculine gaze.

Later in the day we met a German in the hotel who had lived long in the country and who, in his day, had been prosperous and happy. Now he was very much the reverse. "Foreign trade in Persia to-day," he said, "is being slowly and idiotically smothered. Perhaps under the Capitulations we foreigners did have things too much our own way. However that may be, nowadays we are living from hand to mouth, and on every side we are baited by futile Government regulations and laws which are so anti-foreign in inspiration that in another ten years, unless future Persian Governments come

to their senses, they will have destroyed all foreign trade in the country. And then where will Persia be? It produces nothing on its own." He spoke of opium, which, whatever the demerits of the trade, is at any rate a main source of profit to the country. "Now the whole of this trade has been thrown into confusion which will end in stagnation," he went on; "for, instead of permitting normal individual enterprise, the Shah has just declared opium to be a Government monopoly, and has sold the monopoly rights to four brothers in Isfahan, through whom all trade must now pass. Their monopoly has, in fact, cornered the market; and we, the traders and producers, are absolutely at their mercy. As a result most of us are no longer cultivating our poppy-fields."

I then asked him casually what he thought about the abortive Anglo-Persian agreement of 1921. He was surprisingly definite in his comments. "Your failure may have appeared a diplomatic disaster," he said, "but actually it was a blessing in disguise. For even if it had been ratified by the Persians, you would never have been able to fulfil your obligations to any Persian Government without going to war with Russia. And that would have been out of the question, and in the end the débâcle would have been even more ignominious. Lord Curzon may have written a good book on Persia, but his dreams of post-war Persia were not only mad but suicidal."

We were sitting taking tea on the verandah outside the window of my room, and our conversation was interrupted by the noise of a battalion of Persian troops marching by in the boulevard below. They were bound for the North-West to suppress a Kurdish revolt; and they were marching to music—curious music. The band, which marched alongside, and not in the column, consisted of three men, two playing on flutes, the third on a clarionet; and, considering the instruments, they made an extraordinary amount of noise and gave excellent step to the men marching in the column. It swung along in good rhythm, but in a laboured style—half a goose-step, half a canter; and on the whole the soldiers were well dressed and smart, except for their footgear, which ranged from ordinary ammunition boots down to elastic-sided "Jemimas" and gym shoes.

The band was not their sole escort. For on both pavements a shrill troupe of yodelling prostitutes kept pace with the column. Our German friend waxed eloquent on the subject. "Harlots have always been the ruin of Persia, and to-day the

disease in the Army is appalling. And not in the Army only, but in every walk of civil life as well. For it has become an accepted practice in the family life of the well-to-do that when a boy reaches the age of twelve or so the father will initiate him in the paths of vice ; and so on, from son to grandson down the generations. That is why Persia will never be a great nation "

This was unpleasant talk, but it reminded me oddly of a chapter of our own British history. As a youth, Bonnie Prince Charlie was manly, vivacious and attractive, but he showed what was then considered to be an odd lack of interest in the opposite sex. So odd, indeed, that in the opinion of his chief supporters something ought to be done. The notorious Duke of Wharton eventually voiced his general opinion in a letter to a friend about the appointment of a new tutor to supervise the Prince's education "*Make my compliments to him,*" he wrote, "*and desire him that he will not only train the Prince for glory, but likewise give him a polite taste for pleasurable vice.*"

Somehow, after the German's unpleasant outburst, conversation waned ; and when he suggested that we might care for a walk in the dusk, we willingly agreed. First we passed barracks where we heard the sunset cheering for the Shah and the house of Pahlevi ; and it was almost night when we entered the emptying bazaars. In the gloom they had the exact eeriness of a cathedral when the verger goes round to put out the lights after the Sunday evensong.

CHAPTER XL

SHIRAZ (PART II)

WE spent our last afternoon in Shiraz out of doors, which was exactly as it should have been. "They establish themselves under the trees, and, with smoking and tea-drinking and singing, while away the idle hour". Lord Curzon was writing of the gardens for which Shiraz is justly renowned, and when the cab which we hired to take us from garden to garden was not shedding its indiarubber tyres, we had what is known in England as a "Pleasant Sunday Afternoon".

Our first garden lay well west of the town, and we drove along the wide boulevard below my window until it petered out aimlessly in a sandy river-bed, on the banks of which Persian soldiers were busy doing musketry and machine-gun practice. Beyond, we climbed slowly up the side of the valley in which Shiraz lies, and so to the garden. It covered some two acres, and was surrounded entirely by a high mud-brick wall, and we entered through a fine thatched gateway to find an unorganized beauty which was quite delightful. It was set on a slight slope towards the south, and as we made our way along a ride cut through symmetrical clumps of towering Scotch firs, the birds were singing everywhere. Half-way up, another ride intersected ours at right angles, framing a perfect view into the south across the rich valley with pinkish-yellow mountains shimmering far away on the horizon. Then a short flight of grass-grown steps and we were standing on a wide gravel terrace in the middle of which was a marble-faced pool. Beyond it was the residence—a wooden structure with elaborately carved shutters and eaves, touched here and there with vivid blues and reds. It was a fine splash of colour against the sombre green of the firs. The gardener, an old white-bearded man, was there to greet us; and in his baggy trousers and long black coat caught in at the waist with a wide belt, he was, I think, the only man

I saw during the whole time I was in Persia who, by his dress, gave me any suggestion that the life of the old Persian miniatures still survived in New Persia. He pottered round after us, singing to himself, and brought us into the house to show us the view down over the garden; and when we were going he gave each of us a posy of orange blossom, as old-fashioned as himself and his garden.

Then back into our cab, the tyres of which had meanwhile been tied up with string, and away through the town and up towards Teng-i-Allahu-el-Akhbar, and then out, a mile across country under the shadow of the hills, to the tomb of Hafez, which stands in another garden. Hafez lived some five hundred years ago, and he and Sadi and Omar Khayyam were the great mediæval lyricists of Persia. His tomb is almost grotesquely unlovely; for to secure it against depredation a recent governor has built round it a wrought-iron structure which at first sight looks like a lion-cage of roughly wrought iron bars surmounted at the top with tin pennons garishly painted in the national colours of Persia. The whole thing is not only unworthy of Hafez, but is in fact an eyesore in the middle of otherwise perfect beauty. There are other graves in the garden, and parties of relatives of the deceased were visiting their family tombs; and later they all seated themselves on their carpets, some in the shade of the cypresses, others under the arches of a graceful summer-house which has been built just below the poet's tomb. Below the summerhouse is an ornamental pool standing in a grove of pines; and as we looked back the arches and pillars of the summerhouse stood reflected in the mirror of the water, and behind them again, rose the dark green of the trees planted round the tomb. It was quite lovely.

Our last play led us right into the hills to the tomb of Sadi, who lived a century before Hafez, and, like him, was a native of Shiraz. Sadi was a man of vast world experience considering the age in which he lived. He knew India and Arabia, and was taken prisoner by the Crusaders in Palestine before he had reached fifty years of age; then he returned to the place of his birth, and for thirty years lived in Shiraz, and here he wrote his *Gulistan* and his *Bustan*. His tomb is in one chamber of a long whitewashed building round which is planted a pleasant copse of trees. But the garden of the place has been tidied into the formality of paths and plots, and does not compare for beauty with that which surrounds the grave of his brother poet.



SHIRAZ THE TOMB OF HAFIZ



SHIRAZ A PERSIAN GARDEN

Back at the hotel we found George waiting for us to introduce us to another cousin, whom he had found serving in the Shiraz garrison. The cousin proved to be a well-set-up young lieutenant of about twenty-six. He was smartly dressed and groomed, and a pleasant conversationalist. He had, George explained, done very well for himself. Originally he had joined the Army as a clerk, and, having shown powers above the ordinary, had not only been given a commission, but had also been sent to France on a four years' course, and now had a command in the Persian Supply and Transport Corps, and was getting £18 a month. The cousin grinned when we asked him what his men got. There were two kinds of private soldiers, he told us, the volunteer and the conscript. The volunteer got either 15s. a month and no food, or 6s. 8d. a month with food; while the conscript got 1s. 6d. a month and food. But both classes were supplied with uniform and equipment free of charge. George's cousin dug George slyly in the ribs. "He wants to join the Army," he said, "and I hope he will; but he must go through the ranks like me, and not try to pull strings to get a commission straight way. Of course, later on he will get a commission—that is, if he is any good. And who knows, in the end he may become a General"—another dig in the ribs; "for did I not learn in France that Napoleon said that every private soldier had a Field-Marshal's *baton* in his haversack?"

At this sprightly sally, George laughed so loud—Haw haw! Haw haw!—that all the beggars who were lying in wait for us below by the hotel door woke up and went out into the middle of the boulevard to see what we were up to now.

And so to an early dinner in preparation for an early start north next morning. But my plans for a quiet evening were quickly upset. We had just sat down at table, when a note arrived for me from an English friend inviting me to dine with a Persian family outside the town. The note was carried by the son of the house, and I accepted at once, and off we went through the town and past Teng-i-Allahu-el-Akhbar. Five minutes later I was climbing three steep flights of steps, flanked by thick hedges of orange blossom, through a garden which under the moon looked a perfect mystery. At the top stood the house, and I was introduced to the party. We all sat round a table groaning with food; but the nations did not mix. On one side were five Persians, on the other four Britons; but conversation *qua* conversation

was non-existent, and such talk as there was consisted only in short-lived ejaculatory remarks which led, not to general intercourse, but to general silence. As a matter of fact, I was at once so plied with food that conversation would have been out of the question. There were salads and spices and fish dishes and sweets and candied sugar plums ; and to wash all this down I was given two whiskies—the first drowned with water, the second a “kill-me-quick”.

After an hour or so, just as I was beginning to feel I could eat no more, there was a sudden move and, to my horror, dinner was announced. What we had been eating was only the *mezze*—the *hors d'œuvre* preparatory to the serious business of the evening. I felt rather faint. The dining-room was large and richly carpeted, but devoid of all furniture, and in the middle on the floor was laid a white tablecloth literally smothered in dishes of various sizes. The larger varieties supported pyramids of rice of different colours, and round them were ranged, like the pawns on a chessboard, smaller dishes containing various highly seasoned condiments such as chutney, chicken's liver, savoury eggs, and other violent-tasting bits and pieces. Round the tablecloth were strewn hard sausage-shaped cushions, and when, like Roman revellers, we disposed ourselves with as much grace as we could muster on the floor, we used the sausages as elbow-rests. The service of the meal was extremely awkward for me, the stranger. I was given a highly polished brass ping-pong racket and a plate, and with the ping-pong racket I dug into the nearest pyramid and shovelled about two pounds of rice on to my plate. I was then given a fork with which I explored the chutney, chicken's liver, etc. ; and when all was done—I had been too polite to refuse anything—I had built what looked like a panorama map of Switzerland. And all that there was to wash down this Gargantuan plateful was sour buttermilk ! Even when I am very well indeed, buttermilk makes me feel rather sick. However, I did my best, and Switzerland slowly disappeared ; but at the end of the meal I felt exactly like a captive balloon.

But this sensation apparently was almost *de rigueur* in such a party. At the further end of the table all my hosts were in precisely the same condition. But they were less particular—or possibly more conventional—in their subsequent reactions. Apparently to belch is the true sign of enjoyment after a Persian meal. Anyhow, where my hosts were sitting there arose a positive storm, and the walls and

roof re-echoed with satisfied explosions. I marvelled enviously, and would have followed suit had I dared. But buttermilk on the top of a "kill-me-quick" whisky is a combination not to be trifled with. So a balloon I was, and a balloon I remained.

My early start on the morrow was the excuse for what was called an early break-up of the party, and at 1 a.m. we Britons struggled to our feet. It was a relief, and so was the walk back to my friend's house through the cool air; and there we sat for a glorious hour overlooking a perfect hexagonal pool. In the moonlight the water was a silver lake, and in its mirror were reflected the dark outlines of the umbrella pines and cypresses which half hid the lights of Shiraz two miles away down the valley. This was the real Persia.

CHAPTER XLI

PERSEPOLIS

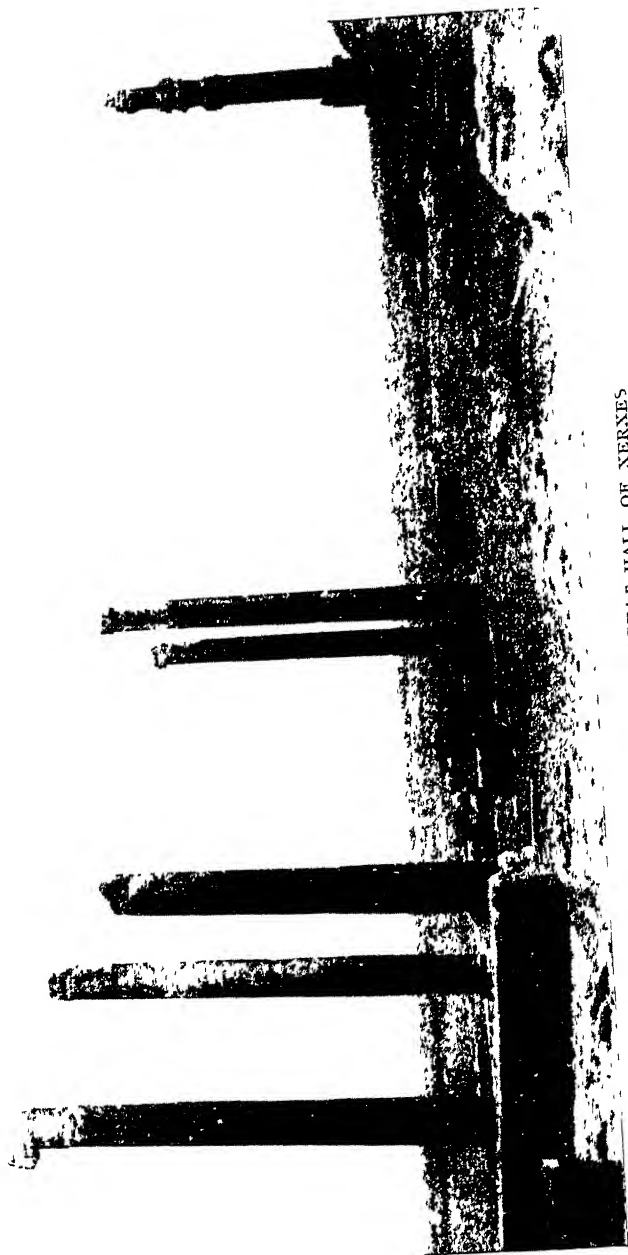
NEXT morning on our road north we had just passed through Teng-i-Allahu-el-Akhbar, when a scrubby-looking policeman asked us for a lift. He certainly had not a Field-Marshal's *baton* in his haversack. For after three miles he suddenly loosed a shrill wail from the rumble. He had forgotten his rifle. Would we take him back to fetch it? There was no need for us to say or do anything: George was so humiliated by this exhibition of Persian military inefficiency that he literally kicked the man into the road.

We were driving carefully, partly because the road was wretched, but mainly so as not to overstrain our new spring; and so we survived the hills, and, once out on the plain of Mervdhist, the sun was shining beautifully and on either side of the road stretched endless poppy-fields. The plain is one of the great opium-producing areas of Persia, and the inhabitants cultivate the flower with the same tense and primitive care as do the Egyptian *fellahin* their patches of cotton. We stopped to examine the ingenious irrigation machinery of one of the many roadside wells. Above the well mouth stood a wooden frame like a loom, spanned by a revolving baulk of timber over which were stretched two strong, highly polished ropes, the ends of which were attached, one to a goatskin water-container, and the other to a bullock. The goatskin was lowered down to the water, and when it was full the bullock was sent charging down a steep incline dug below the ground level. When the skin reached the top an ingenious contrivance compressed it, and the water splashed into a wooden runnel, sloped clear of the well, and fed a constant stream into the irrigation channels in the cultivation itself. It was all most intriguing.

We were now approaching Persepolis—and this time from the proper angle; and at last, some eight miles ahead to the north at the end of our perfectly straight road, we saw



PERSEPOLIS THE GREAT STAIRWAY



PERSEPOLIS THE GREAT HALL OF XERXES

he ruins. Now there was no disappointment. With the sun shining on the tall grey columns they looked marvellous against the sheer and forbidding hillside behind. Poor Persepolis. It is wonderful in ruin, but it must have been remendous in the heyday of its prosperity. It was built by Darius and Xerxes, the Achemenians, and they used it mainly as the ceremonial capital of their empire—their New Delhi—visiting it only on special occasions either from Shushtan, their winter palace in the south, or Ecbatana (Hamadan), their summer residence in the mountains. But fire and earthquake and the destructions of invading armies have taken a full toll of Persepolis throughout the ages, and as disaster followed disaster the glory departed. Alexander burned it; the Parthians used it only as a headquarters of local government; under the Sassanians it recovered some of its former prestige as a seat of the Royal House of Ardashir; and then the Arabs arrived and after a great resistance it was captured and sacked. And this destruction was only the first of many, so that a foreign traveller visiting the place early in the seventeenth century found nothing but a jumble of ruins.

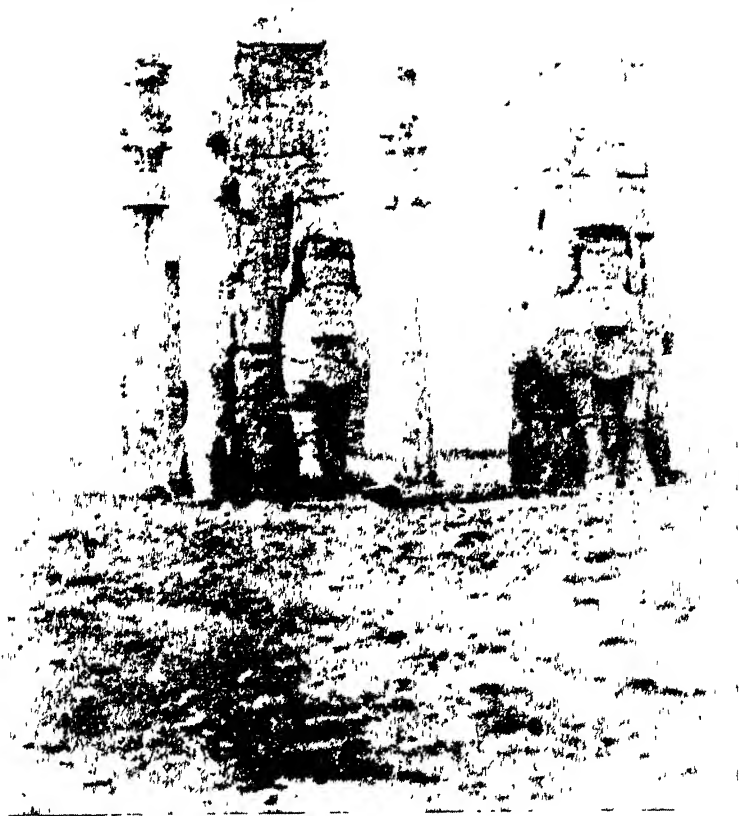
After such a tragic history it is wonderful that so much should have survived. We drew up at the base of the great platform on which the Achemenian halls and palaces had been built. The walls of the platform stand from twenty to fifty feet above the level of the plain, and contain an area measuring in rough figures 500 by 300 yards square. The stairway leading to the platform level is inset in the north-west corner of the walls, and we climbed one of the twin flights of wide, easily graded and well-preserved steps, and from the top had a great view into the south-west across the now empty plain which had once supported a thickly populated township. The ruins themselves lay to the north and east, and, though at first sight they seemed too sparse and scattered to convey anything to amateurs such as ourselves, once we had got our bearings the whole place gradually became intelligible and seemed almost to live. We owed our pleasure and interest entirely to the head of the German Archæological Mission, which by the permission of Shah Riza is excavating on the platform. The British Consul in Shiraz had kindly given us an introduction to him, and under his patient guidance we saw the reconstruction of the place.

On his suggestion we left the Porch of Xerxes to the end, and, passing it, climbed a shallow stairway leading on to the terrace on which had stood the Great Hall of Xerxes. The

carvings of the stairway were so fresh that it was almost impossible to think of the centuries which had elapsed since Xerxes held his court. A lion was attacking a bull with superb action, and the frame in which this bas-relief was set was studded with tiny rose medallions still as crisp and clear as the day on which they were chiselled. Of the hall itself there only remain the isolated pillars which we had seen from the plain below. They are tall and beautifully masoned, and one of them still supports, at an almost impossible angle, a fragment of a mighty capital which has somehow miraculously remained in position through a long series of earthquakes. But enough has survived to convey an unforgettable impression of huge size and symmetry.

Beyond the hall, and close to the edge of the platform, is the Palace of Darius. It has a distinct atmosphere of Egyptian architecture. The stone walls are thick; over the doorways and windows are still huge stone-carved lintels; and here also the carving of the bas-reliefs has survived marvellously, and they are far more lively than are the corresponding carvings in the Egyptian temples. One in particular remains in my mind. It adorns a side wall of the main entrance into the palace, and depicts Darius very complacently disembowelling a griffon with the head of a unicorn, the winged body of lion, the tail of a scorpion, and the feet of an eagle. Past this palace stands the much greater palace of Xerxes himself—another Egyptian-like ruin, and again full of wall carvings, mostly of rows and rows of conquered kings, with here and there a scene depicting the king out a-hunting with his trains of camels and donkeys and his fleets of attendants offering him this and that for his royal pleasure. This palace stands on the extreme south-east corner of the platform, and beyond it we walked along the top of the wall, which here rises fifty feet above the plain and is no longer straight, but angled sharply in keeping with the configuration of the natural rock formations beneath.

We were now facing east and north towards the mountains, and just below the mound on which Xerxes' palace stands the German Mission was excavating a newly discovered ruin which our host told us had probably been the women's quarters in the royal court. But I found it too difficult to visualize; and I confess that I was equally bewildered by the Great Hall of the Hundred Columns, the ruins of which stand well back towards the cliffs. I could only see a chaos of fallen stones. Here and there were wall carvings, but on the whole,



PERSEPOLIS THE PORCH OF XERXES



PERSI POLIS THE WINGED BULLS

so thorough has been the destruction and so little has survived in its original setting, that nothing, not even our hosts' vivid account, could summon up in my mind an idea of what it must have been. It was, however, the *chef-d'œuvre* of Persepolis, and, as our host told us, it is almost certain that here Alexander held his feast, the climax of which was debauch and the destruction of the building by fire.

We did not climb the cliff—I am not sure if we could have had we wanted—to see the solitary royal tomb hewn into the rock-face high above us. Lord Curzon attributes it to one of the kings who succeeded Darius and Xerxes; and from below, through our glasses, we could see the still-perfect carving. The almost domestic style of the architecture—the formal front, the regular pilasters, and above a decoration almost like eaves and a roof—reminded me at once of the Nabatean Temple at Petra.

We had left the Porch of Xerxes to the end, and I am glad we did; for it is certainly the most vivid of all the remains. It stands close to and just above the top of the Great Stairway from the plain, and at each corner is a pylon some thirty-five feet high on which is carved in bas-relief a human-faced and bearded winged bull. Two face south across the plain, and two towards the mountains to the north, and their wings are folded back in perfect spread up the side walls, while their hoofed feet are planted almost aggressively at each corner of each pylon. Of all the monuments that I have ever seen none quite compares with these Bulls of Persepolis. Though not so large, they are far more intimately impressive than the Colossi of Thebes, and in a sense the only monument which I feel I can at all compare with them for grandeur and mystery is the Sphinx.

Our host showed us high in the inner walls of the gateway the two cuneiform inscriptions of Xerxes. They are in three languages, and this is an extract from Curzon's translation:

I am Xerxes, the great King, the King of Kings, the King of the many-tongued countries, the King of this great Universe, the Son of Darius, the King, the Achemenian.

The words rang in my ears as we descended slowly down the stairway to rejoin the car. To write as he wrote meant that Xerxes was proud, and justly proud, of his creation in Persepolis—as proud indeed as ever Louis XIV was of his Versailles.

Persepolis was by far the greatest experience of our whole

tour, and not for us only, but also for George. He was absolutely enthralled. It woke all his pride in his Persian nationality, and as we walked round with our host he followed every explanation with the closest attention, and I am not ashamed to say that many of the questions which he asked were far more intelligent than those which occurred to us. Later, after we had said good-bye and were trailing under the cliff-side into the north, his enthusiasm persisted, and he regaled us with the stories of Rustum and other heroes of Persian antiquity with a wealth of detail which once or twice made me look at him almost curiously, wondering how a youth who knew so much could possibly at the moment be "dish-washer" to two so-called educated Europeans who knew nothing at all. George was suddenly a bit of a mystery.

It is a well-known feature of travel that intense interest often produces a reaction of utter boredom, and the rest of our day, as we made our way along the road over which we had passed only four days before, was boring to the point of depression. However, we made good progress, and drove long and late—so late, indeed, that finally we were plodding along under the moon, longing for anything with a roof where we could shelter. It was stupid of us, but in the end we had more luck than we deserved. At last a single light shone across a wide empty plain, and ten minutes later we had drawn up opposite a police-station, round which clustered a tiny village. The whole garrison—five men—turned out to receive us; whereupon I hastened to produce my letter from the Persian Legation in London, and George read it aloud—very aloud. At once the five sprang to attention and placed themselves completely at our service, retailing a list of possible lodgings for the night.

The first suggestion was the local *Chai-Khana*. George went in first, but was out again in a second like a shot rabbit. The owner's child had measles, so that was off. Next two cells in the police-station were offered, but they smelt of potting sheds, and when we flinched the police-sergeant quite agreed. "They are all right for robbers," he said, "but not for you. Would you like to try the village school? It is quite close." It stood in the middle of a jolly garden, but unfortunately the man who that afternoon had been irrigating the place, had forgotten to close one of the channels, with the result that most of the water had run into the school, the floor of which was about an inch deep in slippery mud. By this time we were feeling decidedly low, and our depression increased

when the next place we were offered proved to be two rooms in a tumble-down grain-store, where the light of our torches revealed squadrons of rats scurrying for shelter. The sergeant was extremely apologetic, but he had still a trump-card up his sleeve: "You shall have my own house," he said. "It will be ready in ten minutes."

George and I went ahead on foot to show the way to Roy across country where I am sure no lorry had ever driven before; and eventually we arrived opposite a blank mud wall, behind which we heard the noise of much coming and going. The four policemen helped us to unload, and just as we finished the sergeant reappeared and, with a fine salute, asked us to enter. We passed through a small arch into a tiny courtyard brightly lit by the moon. At one end was a platform, and round it a pillared colonnade out of which opened a series of little rooms like bathing boxes. Everything was spotlessly clean, and there was a separate room for all three of us, and a larger one for our meals and our kit. Already the villagers had arrived, and everyone helped us, and everyone was terribly excited, for we were the first European visitors who had ever graced the place; and when our tables and our chairs blossomed into shape, and our luncheon-basket disgorged its contents, and our pots and pans appeared, enthusiasm oozed from every quarter. Then two charcoal fires were lighted, and butter was produced, and water gushed and eggs were laid, and while Roy fried his, the sergeant and I boiled mine. George ate his raw, sucking the contents through a hole. When he had finished, he asked us for some chocolate to give to the sergeant's *Hanum*. Later we knew the reason. After the meal he remained with us and the sergeant to gossip, while outside the shadows of the *Hanum* and her small son flitted like wraiths against the moonlit wall opposite. They were busy washing up for George.

Next morning life was still perfect. I woke just before dawn; and squatting on the verandah outside my open door sat the *Hanum* and her son. They were coaxing life into one of our over-night charcoal fires. The moon was still high, but the walls of the courtyard had just caught the pink of dawn, and the sky was paling, and against this fairy background there stood out in silhouette the curiously graceful crouching figure of the black-shrouded *Hanum* and, at her side, the boy, an imp in butcher-blue, blowing the embers fit to burst his lungs. The flame flickered, and the boy pattered away for fresh charcoal, and the *Hanum* fanned and fanned. Suddenly

she sneezed, but once only, and I saw her raise her eyes to the sky, and her lips moved with some prayer to keep the Evil One away from her, whose sneeze had not been followed by a saving second spasm.

The sneeze had woken Roy in his room, and he lumbered from his bed and walked out on to the verandah in his py-jamas. I expected coy embarrassment from the *Hanum*; but not a bit of it. She looked up and smiled. "*Salaam*," she said, and then went on with her fire. She was his hostess and he was her guest. And soon Roy was talking to her by signs, and the boy brought him water, and in a minute he was splashing and blowing over his basin while she watched him proudly. It was all most refreshingly natural.

I then got up, as it was time for me to see to the porridge which I had left soaking overnight in a saucepan. Would the *Hanum* put it over her fire? But mind, it must be kept stirring, or else it would burn. She chirruped with excitement and pleasure. And then came my morning toilet. When I lathered they marvelled; when I gargled they gaped. It was pure theatre, and I played up. And then more theatre George was awake and staggered out on to the verandah unshaven and blowsy, for, as usual, he had not bothered to undress. And, still half asleep, he started on the packing. First he rolled my valise from the wrong end; then he spilt a kettle of water; then he hit his head against the low lintel of the door. He was a complete and perfect knockabout.

All the village assembled to see us leave, and I took photographs of the group. All the women covered their faces, save only the *Hanum*. She actually posed. Was she not our hostess, and were we not her guests? I shook hands with her and the sergeant and the boy. But at first the boy ran away in terror—real terror. I think he thought I was going to steal him. But his father caught him. "No, Ismail, not the left hand. Give the gentleman your right." I might have been the squire at the village sports prize-giving.

Sormeh—that was the name of the village—showed us to what heights Persian hospitality can rise. Only in Ireland have I ever had so thorough and so wholesome a welcome.

That afternoon we were back in Isfahan.

CHAPTER XLII

DAULATABAD AND THE TRIUMPH OF GEORGE

WE broke our journey for two days at Isfahan. We could have stayed weeks. For it had captured us as no other town in Persia, and we left it with real regrets—but most efficiently. George, very proud of himself, was breathlessly on time. "I was asleep at five," he said, "and then I woke, and when I knew how angry you would be if I was late, I jumped straight from my bed, and I have run half a parasang (two miles) in nine minutes." I was so pleased with his punctuality that I had no heart to challenge his record-breaking performance; and, having started the day well, he kept his form brilliantly. Indeed, our two days to Hamadan were George's all the way.

He at once embarked on the story of his adventures in Isfahan. He had been staying with more cousins—his family connections seemed to be ubiquitous—and they had brought him to see the Shaking Minarets, which we had not seen, and he was terribly proud to be one up on us. The Minarets, he told us, look quite ordinary; but when one of them is leant against, not only does it shake perceptibly, but its twin at the opposite corner of the building shakes in sympathy. George went even further and swore that when he pushed one minaret the whole building shook. "I saw it with my eye," he said. "One minaret shook and then the other, and then the whole house, it shook too. I but a bowel [bowl] of water in the building below the minaret, where I did stand; then I pushed my minaret and it shook hard, and the other minaret shook hard. I saw them with my eye. I could not see with my eye that the building shook, but I know it did, for the water leaped out of the bowel [bowl], which means that the whole building shook."

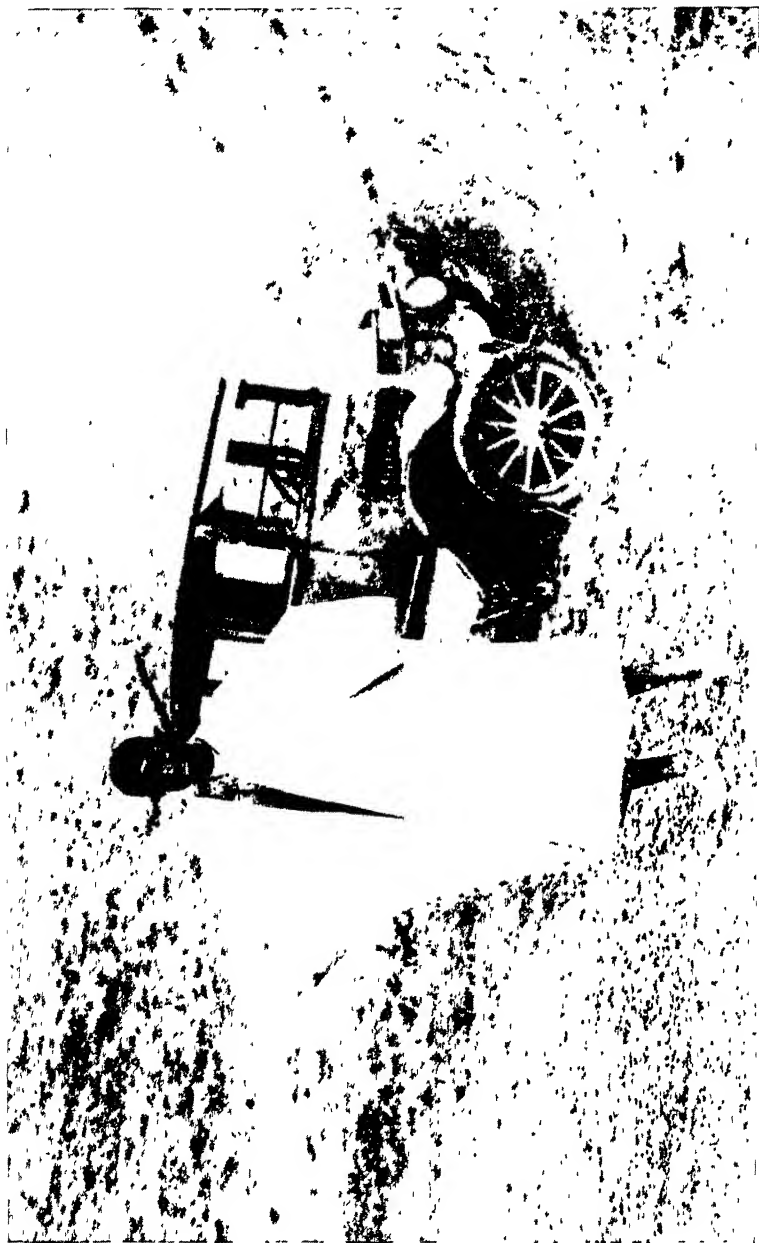
While he was explaining, a Persian soldier, who was oddly carrying a dead rat in his hand, hailed us for a lift; but George would not hear of it. "That man is not a Persian," he said.

"Persians do not eat rats. He is an Arab, and they are dirty peoples. They eat rats and anything and boil them in pots."

George's enthusiasm kept us going all through a dull morning over a dreary road; but after lunch life became much better. A hundred miles north of Isfahan we forked sharply into the north-west for Hamadan, and not only was our new road good, but it was also crooked, and long straight roads were by now badly on our nerves. And then, better and better, we started climbing and were quickly above the arid monotony of the plains and in well-watered country, green, interesting and alive. At once both of us reacted. We compared the scenery with Scotland and Ireland. When the rain fell, we remarked that the colours had become even more beautiful. We kept our eyes on our aneroid and shouted out the rising heights to an interested George in the rumble; and where the road had been washed away, our only comment was that, if one had to dawdle over bad patches, it was best that they should occur in places of beauty. We were, in fact, revelling in the change, for endless desert plains are terribly demoralizing.

But mountains are not all joy in the failing light of a rainy afternoon, and we had two nasty passes to negotiate with treacherous turns and gradients which reduced our speed annoyingly; and just after crossing our second mountain range we came upon a bad crash. A "T" model Ford sedan was embedded four feet deep in a nasty clay bank. Its wheels gaped, its radiator leaned back on the engine, its front axle was bent like a bow, and on the running-board, with his head in his hands, sat the poor chauffeur. He begged for a lift to Sultanabad, and when we questioned his wisdom in leaving his car unattended in the wilds, all he did was to give two shrill whistles. The next minute out of a hollow appeared an extraordinary-looking shepherd, with the face of a lunatic and the grin of a seraph, the hat of a Charlie Chaplin, and a stiff felt cloak which stuck out from his shoulders and made him look exactly like a sandwich-man in Regent Street. He quickly adapted himself to the job of caretaking, and when we left, he had already collected his flock round the car, and himself was settling down for a comfortable night inside. Anyhow, the car would be all right, and Persian goats and sheep are happily gregarious.

By the time we reached Sultanabad we knew all about the crash. "Sir," George told me, "he had no brakes at all, and the car ran down the hill; and how could he stop it?"



A ROAD CRASH
"A 'T' MODEL FORD SEDAN WAS EMBEDDED FOUR FEET DEEP IN A NASGY CLAY BANK"



THE ROAD TO DAULATABAD

But his three passengers were so angry that they never paid him, and they went on to Sultanabad in the post lorry and stopped him from getting into it with them. They were bad and cruel men."

In Sultanabad the chauffeur got us to drop him at the police station. His brother was a policeman, he told us, and if he had to hunt half the night he was going to find those three passengers who had refused to pay their fares and have them arrested.

Next morning George was again punctual, and even more excited than the day before. He lived at Daulatabad, and before we left he begged for ten minutes to telephone to his brother to say that he was bringing us to lunch. This was news to us; and I am afraid that our acceptance of the invitation was very patronizing. We thanked him, but said that on no account was his brother to make any special preparations for us: we would bring our own food, and we would only stop a very short time, as we wanted to be in Hamadan well before nightfall, etc., etc. And then I expressed slight surprise that a brother of his should be on the telephone. George merely grinned. "He is a very busy man and a very important man," he said mysteriously, and rushed away to telephone. He was away an hour instead of ten minutes, but just as we were getting to boiling-point, he was back with a gracious smile to say that his brother would be glad to receive us, and that all friends of George were his friends. Curiouser and curiouser.

And so away into the country. It was even more beautiful than our stage of the previous afternoon. Great undulating plains tapered into fine valleys, and then there would be a steep climb and a pass and another valley and another plain; and always on either side fine blue mountains flecked with great black cloud shadows. So, though the road was bad, and the rain had left great pools across it, nothing mattered in such surroundings. The fields were rich and green; there were poplar groves and fruit orchards and neat villages; and down every slope streams bubbled and sang, and in the valleys the rivers ran creamy-brown. And all in perfect sunshine and under a racing sky.

But our exhilaration was pale compared with the excitement of George as we approached Daulatabad. We had topped the last pass, and ahead of us lay a wide, well-cultivated valley; and suddenly from the rumble he became shrilly articulate. "You are now in the country of my family!" he shouted.

"Do you see that village over there? That belongs to my cousin. And those fields down there? They're my uncle's. And that farm over there? That's my mother's. And that forest over there? That's mine!"

"But, George," I interrupted, "if all this belongs to your family, you must be very rich."

"We were very rich," he replied. "For my grandfather owned many, many villages, and was so rich that Shah Nasraddin gave him his daughter as a wife, and she gave him five sons, and my father was the fourth, and all this belongs to my father, and soon we are going to be very rich again. When the Russians were here in the war they robbed us of much money, and burned many of our villages, and that made us poor; but now they are gone, and we have Shah Riza, and our peasants are working for us and we have much money!"

All this, shouted at breakneck speed, took some time to digest, but eventually I thought that I had the hang of it.

"Well, if your grandmother was daughter of a Shah, you belong to the Royal Family."

George looked at me blankly.

"Of course," he said. "Am I not Mohamed Ali Khan Lotfallian? I am Khan because I am royal. Didn't you understand?"

But he gave me no time to answer, for he was far too engrossed in pointing out more of his family possessions. We passed below a village streaming up the mountain, and all the men on the roadside bowed from the waist. But not to us—to George.

"This is my village," he said simply.

"But," I answered, "it is miles from Daulatabad. Do you come out and look after it?"

"Oh yes. In the summer I do go out there very often, for it is cool and full of springs and the water is clear and fresh."

"What do you do?"

"Oh, I read my books and lie out in the gardens in the shade of the trees."

"But don't you do any work?"

"Oh yes, sometimes when I am tired of reading, I do cultivate a little; and often I go out to see that the peasants are working hard so that the village may be good for us."

I then attempted a little flippancy.

"Well, George, as all this is yours, I wish your family would keep the roads better. If Shah Riza came along, he

would be very annoyed if he was bumped as we are being bumped."

George laughed loud and long.

"When I am a grown man and have many sons of my own and am very rich, then the roads will be good and you will not have one bump. You must come and see one day."

"But when you are as grand as that, George, may I still call you 'George'?"

And this very feeble joke lasted us right into Daulatabad.

There George came right into his own. Everyone saluted him with deep deference, and many even ran after us; and at last there was a sudden turn into a side track, and in the middle of a waving poplar-grove we saw a house which looked about as large as Kensington Palace. George was already half out of the car, and when we stopped he leaped in front of the bonnet and made a jolly bow to us.

"This is our house," he said. "We will go through the gate and all within it is yours."

Next minute through that gate came rushing a platoon of George's retainers—his chief butler, his chief baker, his candlestick-maker—ten or twelve elderly men, all bowing low over his hand and then saluting us and bidding us welcome. George bowed acknowledgment for himself and for us, and then scurried into the house, leaving us alone. In another minute he was back with his brother.

"This is Muzzaffer Khan," he said. And Muzzaffer Khan, in halting English, bade us his welcome to the home of the Lotfallians.

"We are proud to receive you," he said. "And there is food waiting for you. But you are fatigued from the road and dust-stained. You must wash to refresh your hands and faces."

We followed as in a dream. Through the gate, one walled courtyard was succeeded by another and even larger walled courtyard, and then there were steps down to a vast and cool cellar in which there were three brimming spring-fed tanks in which golden carp were swimming lazily. George drew us water and Muzzaffer produced towel and soap and a basin, and we washed in a coolness and a spaciousness divine.

"And now we will lunch," said Muzzaffer. He and George led the way up a wide staircase into the body of the house, and we were ushered into a large room flanked with chairs. We sat on one side, and on the other, facing us, Muzzaffer and George, and at once the chief butler served tea. Then first George and then Muzzaffer begged to be excused, and we

were left alone to wait for lunch. We waited for half an hour, during which, although there were many noises "off", no one came to see us. At last I saw George whizz past the door in the wake of the chief butler, who was carrying a tray about the size of the face of Big Ben. It was lunch; and after more alarms and excursions by the chief butler George reappeared to say that our party was now complete, as his other guest had arrived. He turned out to be George's old tutor who had taught him his picturesque American-English, and we all entered the dining-saloon, which was about as big as a golf-green; and for the next hour we ate pink rice, yellow rice, and brown rice, with incidental pellets of unknown delicacies, until we could eat no more.

Everything would have been delightful had it not been for the American tutor. He was priggishly aggressive. "Persia," he said, "only needs the friendship of disinterested foreigners, and that is why the Persians hate the British. You British tried to take possession of the country after the war, and you made the great mistake of sending up with your army all the riff-raff of your officers from Baghdad. They made the Persians hate you, and the Persians will never forgive." In the end, conversation became horribly strained, and I regret to say that I so far lost my temper as to carry the war into the enemy's camp with a very spiteful denunciation of American decadence as a result of Prohibition. The ex-tutor was stirred. "I am a Prohibitionist, of course," he said sententiously; "in spite of many temptations."

I could not bear the conversation any longer, so I rose and asked George whether he remembered that I had in my suitcase a picture which he had bought in Teheran for his mother. The picture was a ghastly oleograph of a very buxom flaxen-haired female of extremely Teutonic proportions. George thought her lovely. So out we went to the car to fetch it. The car was entirely surrounded by children, the offspring of George's retainers, and they gave their lord and master a shrill welcome. George was quite delightful with them. He kissed all in turn, and then showed them the oleograph, which they loved; and then off he went to see his mother. But before he disappeared I had just time to hint, rather deferentially, that time was passing, and that he must not forget that we were due at Hamadan that night. "Try and be back in half an hour," I suggested with sudden politeness. George looked slightly disappointed. "But I have not seen my friends," he said. "I must see them and my sisters and my

cousins and my uncles and my aunts. I have not seen them for a month." And with that he was gone, and I did not see him again for another hour and a half. In the interval we toured the town, visiting the markets and the carpet stores, and finally paying a call on the ex-tutor's wife, who was much nicer than he was.

But it was nearly four o'clock when we reassembled for departure. Before we left I thought I ought to send some message to George's mother, the Princess; and I asked him to thank her from us both for a delightful visit, and to say that I hoped that she thought that we had looked after him well, and that we had not overworked him. George returned in a quarter of an hour with her reply. "She is delighted with you, both with your appearance, which she noticed as you passed, and with my account of how I have lived with you. And she does not mind at all that you called me 'George'. As a matter of fact, she thinks it was very clever of you to have christened me after your King, seeing that I am the great-grandson of a Shah."

When we left, I looked up at the battlemented roof above the main gateway, and there in a row were George's mother and his three sisters. His mother was dressed in black, his three sisters in white, and all held their veils tightly clasped across their faces. I leant far out of the front seat and doffed my hat to them. George was delighted. "That will be the first time," he said, "that an Englishman has ever taken off his hat to my ladies, and I do not expect they know what it means. Of course they do not know your manners as I do; but when I tell them they will understand and will be very pleased."

And so away; but until we were clear of the town it was slow going. For at every corner there seemed to be more and more of George's relations; and wherever they were, there we had to stop, and out George would jump to kiss them, male and female alike, as though he were never going to see them again. It was a great end to a day which was definitely George's apotheosis. But it was late, and the road was bad, and instead of reaching Hamadan by nightfall it was dark and our lights were on before we again skirted the mound of Ahasuerus' Citadel and were back where we had left five weeks before.

CHAPTER XLIII

TO TABRIZ

AT Hamadan we were back on the Baghdad-Teheran road, and for a hundred miles we followed it north-east until, just short of Kasvin, it branched north-west and we entered the new All-Persian motor road to Tabriz. This direct route used to be only a third-rate caravan track for pack- and animal-drawn traffic through the foothills across the swamps and finally over the Shibleh Pass; and the normal traveller from Teheran to Tabriz took ship at Enzeli on the Caspian for Baku, and thence travelled on the Russian railway to Tiflis and finally back into Persia again across the frontier at Julfa. But apart from the inconveniences of such a wide detour, it was offensive to the *amour propre* of New Persia that the direct route from the capital to the second largest town in the country should be ignored—and wisely so, owing to its discomforts and dangers; so a new road was planned and is being built, and already it is marked on the maps in vivid red to indicate a first-class thoroughfare.

My friend the British Vice-Consul at Hamadan, to whom Roy and I will be eternally grateful for the introduction of George, was very anxious to see Tabriz and Kurdistan; so we readjusted the rumble so as to make an extra seat, and when we pulled out of Hamadan up the road to Kasvin we were a party of four, and not a bit too cramped. Early the same afternoon we struck the new Tabriz road. Its only merit was that, once on it, we couldn't lose the way, as it was the only road leading anywhere. Otherwise it entirely belied its vivid marking on the map. It was loosely metalled and mostly undrained, and on the slopes the loose metal produced skids which would have made mud jealous, while on the low-lying stretches water lay everywhere. We drove very delicately and came to no harm. But others had been either less careful or less fortunate. Towards dusk we found two Government lorries hopelessly bogged by the side of the road. Both had

skidded on the loosely metalled track, and their skids had carried most of the loose top dressing with them into the ditch ; and, judging from the attitude of the drivers, they looked as though they would remain where they were for a long time yet. Both were scandalously overloaded with German ammunition for Tabriz, which had been imported against equivalent German exports of carpets to Berlin ; but, though the accident had occurred early in the day, so far no one would take the trouble to unload, and all that had happened up to date was that both engines were badly strained because the drivers would try to get out loaded, and now the wheels were badly stuck in the soft earth. Persians are really most extraordinary when it comes to motors.

The rest of the day was a strain, as is always the case towards the end of long days in tiresome country. And the country we were in was very tiresome. It was bleak and featureless—a wide steppe-like plain with low grey hills on either side ; and a cruel wind hit us from the north, bringing with it squalls of rain and once a sharp hail-storm. As a result we were all cold and silent, and rather miserable by the time we at last reached Jinjan just before dark. But, thank goodness, it produced a primitive but quite clean hotel, and, with George very much on his toes in the presence of his consular patron, we soon had braziers going and were cooking a fine supper.

After that we were all ready for bed. But I was not destined to sleep well. George's patron had presented us with a cooked chicken which we had earmarked for lunch next day, and for safety it was put into my room with the rest of the baggage. I may have been asleep for perhaps twenty minutes, when I woke with a start to see two cats standing on their hind legs, trying to tip up the basin which was guarding the chicken. A well-aimed boot upset their campaign, and I slept again for perhaps another hour ; and then back they were again with three more friends, and this time they succeeded in dislodging the basin, but my second boot was just in time to prevent their getting away with the booty. By this time I was raging, and, having no more boots, I got out of my camp-bed, put the bird back under the basin, and on top of it piled two suitcases and the luncheon basket. Then, having recovered my boots, once again I slept. But the cats won. The cutting-out party returned six strong, and with a crash toppled over the whole of my erection, and before I had time to get my boots into action, I saw in the beam from my torch a black-and-white

monster disappear into the night with the bird in its jaws. This was the episode which finally destroyed my childhood's illusions about Persian cats.

I felt very limp next morning, and the news which George brought to us at breakfast made me feel more limp than ever. The village, he said, was full of cars bound for Tabriz, as we were; but no one could get on, as thirty miles out a river had become impassable as a result of the recent rains. "In fact," he concluded chattily, "we may be here for a week." This was ghastly, as a week's delay would mean that we would never get to Tabriz at all, for we had not a week to spare according to our timetable. But, as usual, George was exaggerating, and after a dreary wait of two hours we heard in the street below sounds of the departure of two lorries in the Tabriz direction; and if they were going—well, we might just as well go too.

But outside the village the road was very trying. After the Teheran-Shiraz stage we had longed for crooked roads, but one can have too much of a good thing. This road couldn't have been more crooked. The country bubbled with silly clay-yellow hillocks, and through them for ten soft and greasy miles we snaked our way like a polo pony in a bending race. Then came our first river obstacle. It was by no means impassable, and—another cheering sign—we saw from the high-water mark on the bank that the water was going down. But after another few miles we came to *the* river. There was nothing cheering about it. It was some 300 yards across, and flowed in three channels with long gravel spits in between. The first two looked, and were, comparatively easy, but in the third, half-submerged under the strong stream, was an unfortunate touring-car, and on the brink was one of the lorries which we had seen starting before us from Jinjan, and which very obviously was jibbing at the prospect ahead.

And then Persia rose magnificently to the occasion. No sooner had we halted than a half-naked rascal rushed up to us and assured us that he knew every pothole and every boulder in the river bed, and that for a fee of twopence he would guide us over. He was another river-navigating officer, and we accepted his offer gratefully; but before the plunge Roy detached the fan so that it should not splash water through the engine, and covered the carburettor and the coil with sack-ing to keep them as dry as possible; and then he took the wheel and, with George roaring interpretations at his side and the rascal screaming instructions from the running-board, in we



THE ROAD TO TABRIZ
PERILS BY FLOOD AND RIVER



THE ROAD TO FABRIZ
IHL KIZIL UZUN BRIDGE.

went. The bonnet cleft the waves like the bow of a battleship, water surged about the running-board, and at one moment I thought we were afloat ; but our executive trio in the vanguard each did their parts manfully, and when we examined the engine on the other side it was none the worse for its immersion.

But our day was destined to be a long alternation of relief and depression. We had surmounted our big obstacle, but beyond it for the next thirty miles the country was frankly silly. Again it bubbled, and there was no question of our going straight. The hillocks and ravines were a regular maze, and our road had soon turned itself inside out, so that our shadow was now ahead, now behind us, now on this side, now on that. We got quite giddy, and we had two vile hours of torture before we were at length clear and down on a river bank with proper mountains ahead.

We lunched by the Kizal Uzun River under the shelter of a beautiful stone-arched bridge—steeply pointed like one of our pack-horse bridges at home—which was built by the Kajar Shahs a hundred and thirty years ago during a campaign against the Russians in the Caucasus. After lunch we had the relief of a good hour in the mountains ; but then we were back again in more maddening country. Certainly the valleys were wider and the hills more spaced ; but, to cancel this, rain began to fall, and both the descents and the ascents quickly degenerated into butterslides. But there is an end to everything, and at four o'clock we were again climbing and the rain had stopped and a keen wind from the north was drying the road in fine style.

All the same we drove very carefully, and with good reason. We were descending a long slope of deep greasy ruts in and out of which we slithered like a salmon on a fishmonger's slab, and approaching us down the opposite slope was a large lumbering lorry. Suddenly it dived sideways off the road and with an appalling clatter turned upside down into the ditch. Its German occupants were miraculously unhurt, but the skid had removed at least half the roadway, leaving a nasty gap for Roy to negotiate with his usual skill. Then, another ten miles on, we met another crash. A long-suffering Ford tourer with eight passengers aboard and mountains of kit tied on here, there and everywhere, had hit a boulder on the road and had side-slipped into a sopping rice-field. The chauffeur, who spoke English, asked us to help. "Would you lift it out of the mud for us ? We have tried, but it is not possible."

We suggested unloading some of the gear, and that the seven passengers might lend a hand. "But must we untie all our bundles?" he replied. "They will take a long time to put on again." "And you will take a longer time to get out if you don't," we retorted: and with that the party bowed to a cruel fate. We hitched seven very unwilling passengers to ropes tied to the back axle, and as soon as the chauffeur reversed and they pulled, the car came out as easily as anything. They were profuse in their thanks, "But for you," they said. "We would have been here all night."

We had still fifty miles to go, but in the cooler heights the car was going better, and, after crossing a river and skirting a lake which shone like silver in the afterglow, we hit the Shibleh Pass just as darkness fell. When I say "hit", I mean "hit". The first gradient rose with shocking precipitancy out of the level plain, and in the next two miles we climbed 2000 feet. But the road was excellent, wide and well-graded, and, as it was dark, we had none of the horrors of seeing too far ahead; and really we crossed the pass and descended the other side with the very minimum of trouble or excitement. But once down in the plain of Tabriz the road was actually *pavé*, and shook us to bits, and in our efforts to avoid a tottering donkey we ran over a goose. George was terribly upset. "Kill a goose: ill luck let loose," he moaned; and after this cheerful announcement he lapsed into gloomy silence, until we stirred him out of his mood to cope with the Tabriz police control.

It was on the extreme outskirts of the town and in charge of a regular grandfather of a Dogberry. He was incredibly obtuse. First the Cairo number of the lorry. Where was Cairo? Why? Then, after verifying the details on our travel permits, our passports. He was terrified of them, and said that he could not attend to them now, but that we must leave them with him. This, of course, we had not the slightest intention of doing after our experiences in Teheran; so George's consular patron weighed in with some facts about his diplomatic privileges. The poor man nearly fainted. "Of course," he said, "but I must have authority. I will telephone." And telephone he did, *forte, fortius, fortissime*, with an assurance at intervals that the answer would be through in four minutes. Why four minutes, I don't know.

Picture us, exasperated and helpless, in a hovel of an office, half lit by a guttering candle; Grandpa dribbling into the telephone; a young assistant eyeing us with cold dislike;

and a friend on his hunkers on a bed eating noisily at onions and rice. Eventually the calmness of despair descended upon us. We unpacked our thermos and some biscuits and a tin of boiled sweets, and settled down for the night, and handed the sweets round to our three hosts. They sucked loudly, and still the telephone clanged. At last George got fed up. "Give me the telephone," he said. "You're tired ; so am I." Grandpapa surrendered and took some more sweets, and George listened in. The line was absolutely dead, and had always been dead, and for twenty minutes grandpa had been shrieking at nothing. When George explained, the poor old man heaved a great sigh of relief and said we were free, and with many apologies gave us back our passports, while the assistant took a last handful of sweets and the rice-eater with his mouth full said that there was a proverb in Persia that everything always came out all right in the end.

Ten minutes later we were safely in the Europa Hotel—Russian and excellent ; and after an omelette and some brown bread and caviare, and I don't know how many bottles of Batum beer, we staggered bedwards at midnight, and I cared not a whit that my bedding was a soiled sheet sewn for convenience on to the quilt. I could have slept in a bed of nettles.

CHAPTER XLIV

TABRIZ

TABRIZ, like Meshed, was very Russian in atmosphere and exterior. Through the centre of the town ran a street as wide and as straight as the Nevski Prospekt, and all the goods we bought for our Kurdistan stage were Russian, except for the biscuits, which were British, and a ready-made suit which I simply had to buy, as all my trousers had parted company with their seats. The suit took a good deal of finding. My first cast only produced some plum-coloured horrors with pleats over the bosoms in which I looked like nothing on earth. But eventually I struck up an acquaintance with an Armenian who spoke English, and he brought me to another shop in the heart of the bazaars where, to my relief, I found a passable brown shoddy costume—made in Warsaw—with quite an attractive pin-stripe running through it. I had, of course, a large audience to see the fun. And it was fun. For nothing would satisfy the tailor but that I must try the suit on then and there *coram publico*. I was greatly embarrassed, as I knew that my pants were full of holes. However, all the onlookers said that the suit fitted me to a "T", and after a jolly haggle I paid thirty shillings for it.

Only a hundred years ago Tabriz was captured by the Russians, and while we were there we were told that as recently as two months before, on the occasion of *Nauruz* (New Year's Day), the Bolsheviks in the town had posted a proclamation on the walls urging the Persian proletariat to overthrow Shah Riza, and promising Russian military support within forty-eight hours in the event of a revolution. The proclamations were, of course, torn down, but the instigators of the movement were not punished; and the talk in the coffee-shops was that the Shah was afraid to take action against the nationals of his Soviet neighbour, who could at any time and without any resistance walk into Tabriz and hold it. Tabriz is, in fact, a target for Soviet propaganda. It aims in

general at a dislocation of all Persian trade, by means either within or without the law, in the hope that eventually the big Persian trading classes will become so dissatisfied with the Persian Government's present policy that they will in desperation support any movement towards the curtailment or suppression of Shah Riza's power.

The three main features of interest in Tabriz were the ruins of the Blue Mosque, the Citadel, and the bazaars. The Blue Mosque was frankly disappointing. It is, of course, a complete ruin, having collapsed as a result of successive earthquakes, but what we saw seemed to be an almost more insignificant shell than the picture in Lord Curzon's book had led me to expect. Some of the tiling still remains, and its blue had certainly a depth and a glitter quite out of the common ; but as a monument it is quite impossible to be enthusiastic over it.

But my friendly Armenian was much more interesting about the citadel. Of it, too, little remains save the gaunt ruin of its immense southern wall. He escorted us to the top by the same stairways up which, in other days, criminals had walked to their doom. For until comparatively recent times the regular form of public execution had been to hurl miscreants from the summit to be dashed to pieces on to the parade ground eighty feet below. Behind us to the north there used to be another parade ground. Its metamorphosis is truly eloquent of New Persia. It is now a fair imitation of a "Luna Park", with a grand open-air café and paths and booths and terraces and, of course, a bandstand.

Then our guide became suddenly serious. Below us was the place where some eighty years ago Mirza Ali Mohamed, the founder of the Bahai religion, had been executed for heresy and sedition. He was a native of Shiraz, and at the early age of twenty-four declared himself as the "Bab" or Gate whereby the world might enter into the joys of the Divine Revelation which had been vouchsafed to him. His was a religion of love, and his mission was that of a John the Baptist to prepare the world to receive another and a fuller demonstration of God's mercy. He gained adherents rapidly, and as rapidly earned the hostility of the powerful orthodox oligarchy in the country, who quickly persuaded the Shah that the movement was dangerous to the dynasty and must be suppressed. The Bab was forthwith arrested, and in due course, after a farce of a trial was condemned to death.

Our guide's grandfather had been in Tabriz and had

witnessed the execution. "The Bab was to be shot with two of his disciples, but they were offered an opportunity to recant before they were pinioned. One succumbed to the temptation and was released; but the Bab and the other stood firm, and were suspended by the arms from gallows-like frames in front of the firing-squad. The order was given and the volley rang out; but when the smoke had cleared away the Bab's friend hung dead on his ropes, but the Bab himself had disappeared. The bullets had cut the ropes and he had fallen unharmed and had escaped into the crowd. Of course he was discovered almost at once, and once again he was hoisted on to the gallows. But the first firing squad refused to act again, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that other soldiers were found to take their place. This time there was no mistake, and the Bab died. Afterwards his body was smuggled away by his friends and buried in a secret tomb, and even to-day none save the highest leaders of the Bahai religion know where he is buried."

I would add that during the whole time we were in Persia we never, save on this occasion, discussed Bahaism with anyone—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that no one ever discussed it with us. It is still a proscribed faith in Persia, and though it has tens of thousands of adherents everywhere in the country—to say nothing of its enormous following abroad, particularly in America—it has been driven underground by official disfavour and in many ways resembles a secret society rather than a religion.

The bazaars are huge, but they are less beautiful and more rambling than the splendid arcades of Shiraz. Not that this in any way detracts from their charm; for to me their darkness and their many twists and turns had a romantic attraction of their own; and in fact I felt absolutely at home in them and had a great time buying my carpet, a fine Tabrizi runner which proved to be the last addition to my carpet map of Persia.

We had one great experience during our stay—as unexpected as it was unpleasant. We were lunching with the British Consul and his wife, who throughout our stay were perfect to us in their hospitality, and just as we reached the *vol-au-vent* of an excellent meal, the town was suddenly shaken by a violent earthquake. It lasted for about a minute and was absolutely terrifying. At once all of us leapt from our chairs to get outside, but for perhaps ten seconds the window into the garden jammed. In those ten seconds I realized all the



TABRIZ THE CITADEL
"OF IT LITTLE REMAINS SAVE THE GAUNT RUIN OF ITS IMMENSE SOUTHERN WALL"



KURDISH TYPES

horrors of hopeless panic. The house was rocking and swaying and the pictures banged on the walls, and I felt very empty ; and when, after perhaps a quarter of an hour, we resumed our meal, I, for one, found the food far less tasteful, while our conversation was definitely on the hysterical side. After lunch we returned to the hotel, where I wanted to write ; but when I went upstairs I found that the shock had cracked the ceiling above Roy's bed, which was covered with debris, while the wall in George's patron's room was cracked from floor to ceiling. It was all just nasty, and when I started to write I could not concentrate. But I persevered, and was making some uninspired progress, when suddenly there was another vile tremor. I rose and fled like a lamp-lighter along the corridor, down the stairs, and out into the streets ; and there I found enormous crowds all standing tense and wide-eyed. I don't mind saying that I felt actual nausea. It is a horrible feeling—an utter helplessness in the face of an uncontrollable force which gives no warning ; and already the news was out that the lunch-time shock had destroyed one entire street in the bazaars, and that eight men had been killed.

However, it was no good gaping, so I returned to work. But not to my room, which was on the first floor. Instead I took my gear to the restaurant and placed my table within arm's reach of the handle of a glass door which opened straight into the street, and gradually my nausea ceased and calm returned. While I was writing George appeared in a great state. He too had been badly scared—the more so as when he went up to my room he had found my hat, but no me, and had feared the worst. He was greatly relieved to see me safe and sound, and then as usual he began to moralize. "Do you remember that goose we killed coming in ?" he said. "It was he that did it. He made the earth quake. *Insha'allah* [Please God] he has now sufficiently avenged himself."

Between our sightseeing and shopping and earthquake alarms we had searched everywhere for information about the road south through Kurdistan to Kermanshah, which was to be our next stage. But no one could tell us anything. Indeed, Kurdistan seemed to be an unknown territory in Tabriz, a place where no one went unless they were flying from justice, or mad ; and the only map we could discover had been made in 1882, and consisted mainly in dotted lines marking the probable routes of possible rivers and a series of name places, attached to most of which, in brackets, were large query-marks.

However, we persisted and at the eleventh hour news did come, but not at all the news we expected or wanted. We had dined with the British Consul, and late in the evening there arrived to see him an Assyrian garage-proprietor and a Persian chauffeur. The latter knew the road south for some two hundred miles, but both he and the Assyrian urged us not to attempt so rash a journey, and painted a picture of terrible roads, hostile people, and complete isolation in the most depressing colours. But we were booked, and when they saw that we were determined, they asked us if we had chains for our back wheels and a good tow-rope, as we would be sure to need both. We, of course, had neither ; but by this time our enthusiasm had fired the Assyrian, and he told us that he would stay up all night hunting for what we wanted, and that by hook or crook he would see that we left at dawn next day completely equipped for the arduous of the road.

All three of us felt slightly downcast, and for me it was the second shock of an altogether agitated evening. I had been bold enough to appear at the party in my new Warsaw suit, and when I rose from dinner it had promptly shed the two back trouser buttons, and at once my braces had whisked up to my collar. Next when I plunged my hands into the pockets to prevent a greater disaster, both came away bodily from the cloth, and not only was I left with my hands in a pair of pocket gloves, but when I tried to extricate them all my money fell down my trouser legs on to the floor. I carried it off as best I could and borrowed a safety-pin or two. But I had learned a lesson. If one buys a ready-made suit from Warsaw for thirty shillings, one may be pretty sure that sooner or later the pockets will develop into Polish Corridors.

CHAPTER XLV

KURDISTAN

OVERNIGHT our Assyrian Good Samaritan had worked like a Trojan, but with only partial success ; for, although he had got us a towing gear, so far he had not found the chains. But with the unknown pitfalls of Kurdistan ahead, he implored us to wait until a shop opened where he had seen some which might suit us ; and he suggested that, instead of staying at the hotel, we should pass the time in his garden as his guests. It was a large garden, and we were not the only visitors. The place was full of beds and the beds were full of people, and the explanation was the earthquake. The sleepers were poor Armenians and Assyrians who had fled *en bloc* from their notoriously flimsy houses for shelter in the less dangerous open, and for an hour we had the enjoyment of watching large double-beds disgorge first the father and mother and then innumerable children. For Armenians and Assyrians breed like rabbits.

At last our host said that he thought the chain-shop would by now be open, so he and I returned to the town by taxi, only to find that the shutters were still up. But soon the loungers of Tabriz got wind of our business, and at once, in the hope of a tip, there were volunteers to find the missing merchant. One knew the café where he took his breakfast and rushed off south ; another knew his aunt's house where he often slept and rushed off north ; and eventually, while they were both away, the man himself arrived out of the east. But his only chains were tiny, and by no feat of iron-mongery could we have adapted them to fit our wheels. So, feeling greatly depressed, we got back into the taxi to rejoin the other two in the garden. Suddenly, with a scream of brakes, our taxi man drew up and hailed a passer-by, and after a lot of shouting it transpired that he knew somebody who, he believed, had exactly the type of chains we required. We snatched thankfully at this straw, turned the taxi round,

and plunged into the bazaars, to draw up eventually outside what looked like a junk-shop. Its proprietor was an enormous Turk, but to my joy he had a pair of gigantic chains which he swore would fit our wheels. They didn't, but they very nearly did, and then the Assyrian emerged as a real Admirable Crichton. He produced some old chains and a cold chisel, and then hammer and bang, bang and hammer—we might have been back in Mohamed Mohamed Omar's Cairo factory—and in the end triumph and an almost perfect fit.

And then the question of payment. We delegated George to retire with the Turk on our behalf into a convenient cabbage-patch, and for five minutes there was much shouting and waving of arms. George then returned to ask me *in English* if I would pay in *English* notes. I gave him a handful, and the Turk leaped at them—he was tired, he said, of Persian tomans, which got cheaper and cheaper—and accepted a very reasonable figure, and we were ready for the road.

But before we left our host insisted on a stirrup cup of tea in his house. For him it would be an honour. Had not the British saved the Assyrians from the Turks, and were we not the only perfect gentle knights in all Christendom? It was almost embarrassing, but the tea was good and our troubles appeared to be at an end.

But after passing Tabriz station, where we had the fun of seeing our first railway engine since "Puffing Billy" outside Teheran, we quickly realized that our troubles were only beginning. Our track lay through a seemingly unbroken series of villages, and for twenty miles, at not more than eight miles per hour, we lurched and skidded through one stagnant pool after another, alternating with long slippery stretches of heartbreaking ruts. But there is an end to everything, and eventually we were clear of the villages and out in open, rolling veldt where the road was practically where we made it. But we had not the slightest notion of where we were. Whenever we saw a landmark we enquired its name, but not once did it make any contact with anything on our pre-historic map, and not until we at last saw far away in the south the sheen of water, did we get our bearings. It was Lake Urmia. The great shining expanse was dotted with tiny islands like a Scotch loch, its foreshore was well planted with trees, the fields were green with growing crops, and to our surprise and relief we came upon a large road-construction party—and hard at work.

Kurdistan is still Old Persia, and, as we had already

learned, did not exactly cater for the peripatetic motorist. But officially travellers such as we were were welcomed. For Shah Riza has earmarked Kurdistan for his next field of pacification, and we were, in fact, allies of his policy of penetration—storm troops for coming cohorts of recruiting sergeants and tax-collectors and mining prospectors. The road-makers had just arrived, and in our first eighty miles we found several short stretches of roughly metalled track. But in between we had to negotiate miles and miles of rough country, plunging ever deeper into a landscape which was eloquent of the immemorial traditions of Kurdistan. The caravanserais were walled and turreted like fortresses, and were, in fact, sanctuaries in this lawless land; and the Kurds we met, to whom George talked in Turki which was the only language they understood, although shyly friendly, looked impossibly fierce with their scowling faces and eerie black clothes and their belts bursting with knives and firearms.

We had lunched late, which shortened our afternoon, and almost before we realized it the sun was sinking into the west behind Ararat across the Turkish frontier, and the problem of our night's lodging arose. And then ensued one of those futile and exasperating situations which recur just as easily and quite as often in countries far more civilized than Kurdistan. There were caravanserais, but for an hour and a half one or other of us said that this one did not look very nice and that we would surely find a much better one a little further on. Without George, I don't know how long this farce would have continued. Happily he had a very healthy dread of the Kurd by day and a positive terror of him by night, and after enduring our shilly-shallying for an hour he declared that we must stop at the next caravanserai whatever it was like, or—— There was no need for him to finish his sentence. For at that moment several healthy daubs of rich mud flattened themselves on the windscreen. We were passing through a village, and a bunch of naughty Kurdish children were our assailants. We hastily agreed with George, and our luck held.

Two miles on we climbed a sharp mountain range and in deepening twilight spotted ahead of us, far below and by the bank of a fine river, a beautiful caravanserai. And we arrived with everyone else—the camels, the donkeys, and the pack-horses. We were, of course, the only motorists, and we quickly discovered that Kurdish hospitality does not lag

behind the Persian variety. Everyone helped us unload. We had three tiny little rooms on the verandahed first floor looking down into the busy courtyard below, and after supper, which incidentally was slightly marred by the invasion of an army corps of cats, we and everyone else turned in for an early night. There was great silence and a lovely mountain breeze and the stars were out, and from my bed I looked hopefully into the south. To-morrow we ought to be half-way towards Kermanshah and the road to Baghdad.

But man proposes and Persia disposes. We were away at dawn, and for ten miles we revelled in an excellent stretch of freshly made road running parallel with the shores of the lake. Then, where the lake ended, we turned west and had to cross two noisy trestle bridges spanning rivers in unpleasantly high flood; and then at Sauj Bulagh our road south branched sharply left-handed, while the main track with its road metal and road gangs continued into the west towards the Rowanduz Gorge, where one day it will link up with the road communications of Iraq.

But our road south had never seen road metal or heard of road gangs. Past Sauj Bulagh it bucketed happily over a network of deep irrigation channels, next it took a long stretch of corn-fields in its stride, and finally it disappeared for good in open prairie where I would have liked to have made a golf-course. There were herds of cattle and goats and horses everywhere, and for a spell we could choose passable going; but eventually we left the pasturelands for cultivation and, alas, refound our track. It was now a wide avenue of deep ruts, some hard, some soft, and all trying; and eventually, midway through a squalid village, we found ourselves faced with the alternative of a pond or a dung-heap. Roy wisely chose the latter, and we were forthwith bogged; but we had the towing gear, and the villagers were champion pullers, and in ten minutes the poor lorry squelched out of its trouble.

Then the villagers spoke. Ahead, they said, the track ran straight into a bog out of which nothing would haul us. But there was a detour, and if we wished they would show us the way. We accepted gratefully, when, to our horror, no less than four enormous men clambered into the already laden lorry; whereupon I told George to suggest as politely as possible that one guide was all we needed. He refused poetically. "If you want a guide, then all must ride." And that was that. The alternative route was admittedly dry, but



A KURDISIAN HIGHWAY



THE RIVER OF SAKKIS WHICH WE NEVER CROSSED

that was its sole recommendation. We started off across a corn-field ridged and furrowed ; then we panted obliquely up a hillside through thick fields of poppies ; and past them we charged any old how round the hillside, canted over to an angle of fifteen degrees. But Roy survived it brilliantly and eventually shepherded us safely and thankfully back on to the old ruts and we said good-bye to the villagers. None of them had ever been in a motor before, and they had enjoyed their ride.

After another ten miles we were clear of the cultivation, and for the rest of our road to Sakkis, where we had planned our half-way halt, we were in hills and highlands with every now and then a wild mountain village rather like the villages of Palestine. All were stone-built and immensely strong, and below the houses stood long camel-hair tents and round them the flocks and the herds. And, as in Palestine, the men came down to the roadside to watch us, while the women remained squatting on their heels outside their doors, spinning their home-grown wool into yarn. It was odd spinning. They whirled the spindle round their heads as though they were Scotsmen about to throw the hammer. And then it began to rain, and on the flats the morasses became quagmires and on the hillsides the tracks turned into horrid butterslides on which we did some terrifying skids. But we did keep going, and at last slithered thankfully into Sakkis, where we turned for shelter into the first caravanserai we saw.

After some food we went off through the rain to find the bridge across the Sakkis stream ; but when we found it our hearts sank. What was normally a purling brook was now a swirling torrent, and the flood had broken the bridge.

We were blankly discussing the future, when up came the police officer, to whom George's patron had a letter of introduction, and the *Mudir* (Governor) of the town.

They could not have been kinder, and both swore that, if it was humanly possible, somehow or other they would get us across. We first inspected the normal ford, and the police officer ordered one of his mounted men to ride across. In the middle the horse was swimming. Then a notable, who owned a herd of water buffaloes, said that he had a grand idea. He would put his animals on the further side of the ford and yoke them to us by rope across the river, and then they would easily pull the car through the water like a torpedo. At first sight this did not seem too fantastic ; so we off-loaded the lorry at the police officer's house where we were to sleep,

and Roy remained to cover its vitals in mackintosh, while the rest of us went round the town. But when we came back he greeted me with a wry grin.

"I have thought it over," he said, "and it's too risky. I can't waterproof all the bits and pieces, and if the water once gets in, goodness knows how I'll get it out again. It's all a bit too submarine for me." The only remaining suggestion was a raft; but when we found that it was to be made out of packing-cases, we said that we could not put anyone to so much trouble.

After that all inspiration died, and we were faced with defeat unless we waited until the flood went down, which might take a fortnight. And such a delay was out of the question. So, like Napoleon at Moscow, we had to admit the failure of our plans, and now, instead of continuing direct to Kermanshah and the Baghdad-Teheran road, we must turn in our tracks all the weary seven hundred miles to Tabriz and Hamadan. It was a bitter moment, but we had the real sympathy of Sakkis to soften our bitterness, and when we had got over our first pangs there was the fun of George's face. He had hated the buffalo scheme, and now he positively beamed with relief.

He came back with us to the police officer's house, and for the rest of the evening was the life and soul of the party. Also he was very much of, and not at all with, the party. For he and our host and three other Persians who shortly swelled the company, had troops of friends in common, and he was now very much our shepherd. But he was an excellent shepherd, and if he had tried he could not have guided the conversation into channels more agreeable to me. To start with it was the war and what had happened in Sakkis. Between 1915 and 1919 the town had enjoyed three conquering invasions: first the Turks, then the Russians, and finally ourselves. The Russians had left by far the worst reputation behind them. They had been horribly cruel, and had robbed and murdered wholesale; they drank, they had no discipline, and they had treated the women of the place shamefully. The Turks had been only a shade better. They did not drink, and their treatment of the women was less offensive; but anyone who showed the slightest opposition to their plans, whatever those plans were, was strung up in no time. Finally the talk turned on the British occupation, and all our friends laughed like anything. Never had Sakkis known such jolly and gullible conquerors. We arrived almost

apologetically, and we paid about three times the proper value for everything, and as for looting and women, why, our rules had been so strict that in the end the good folk of Sakkis were almost sorry for our soldiers. "For," said the police officer, "what is the use of conquering a place if you can't have a bit of fun?" In fact, the British occupation had been the nearest approach to Eldorado which Sakkis had ever known or ever would know.

Eventually we wearied of war and passed to the lighter topic of superstitions, and I enquired after Persian equivalents of those I knew: salt-spilling, the number 13, the opening of an umbrella indoors, walking under ladders, magpies—everything I could think of. But I only got two contacts. Thirteen was a bad number for fair-haired Persians, and Persian magpies foretold Persian babies, and they told us with shrieks of laughter of a newly married man who saw sixteen magpies and insisted on being divorced next day.

All this was balm to us in our mood of dejection, and what with tea-swilling, smoking, and gossiping, the two hours before we were summoned to dinner passed like a flash. At the meal the police officer took one end of the table and George, who was by this time every inch a prince, the other; but to my disappointment it was a European meal with no ping-pong rackets. And then thankfully to bed. George and Roy shared one room, the Consul and I the other, and before I turned in I visited the other two to say good night. Roy was asleep—he had had a nerve-wracking day—but George was still in the preliminary stage. He was going to bed in his underclothes, and was vastly proud of a new set of drawers and pants which he had bought in Tabriz.

CHAPTER XLVI

ENVOI

NATIONAL history is always reticent about national retreats, usually because retreating armies have no idea why or whither they are retreating; and when next morning we turned our backs on our goal, all three of us, Roy, George, and myself, were dazed as well as depressed. George's patron speeded us on our weary way. He had been lent the police officer's fine white Arab pony and a mounted escort, and he was going to ride over those 150 miles which we would never see to the Baghdad road. So we enviously wished him luck and off we went. But I, historical-wise, will be reticent about our next three days. And for the very good reason that, save for a few isolated incidents, I remember very little of what happened, and in my disheartenment I neglected my diary.

On our way back to Tabriz it poured, and we used our chains more times than I can recall, and in Tabriz itself we had our first real accident. We had called on our friend the British Consul, and, leaving him, were cruising quietly along what looked to be a perfectly solid street, when suddenly, with a sickening lurch, one of our back wheels went clean through a flimsily covered drain and we all but upset. And then Persia gave a last superb exhibition of her virtuosity. The inevitable crowd had assembled, and in it was a gang of cultivators armed with spades, and in less than no time, with George egging them on with lucrative promises, they had dug a hole in the roadway round the erring wheel about the size of an elephant's grave. They then hitched themselves here and there and anywhere on to the car, Roy got the engine going, and when he slammed in our bottom gear everyone went into the collar, and after three frightful shudders the car lifted itself safely on to firm ground. There were congratulations all round and a liberal distribution of largesse to the grave-diggers, and away we rolled. And I would risk a

fair-sized bet that that elephant's grave remained intact for many moons.

Next night we slept at a village called Mianeh, which is known far and wide in Persia as "the Home of the Enemy of the Stranger". Roy and I had a frightful night, and next morning at breakfast we showed our weals to George, but he only laughed. "Haw-haw," he said; "the 'Enemy' made no mistake about you! He knew you were strangers. But I never had a bite. He knew I was a Persian. I am sure he is far cleverer than any bugs you have in any of your houses in England."

Two nights later was our last with George, whom we were to drop at Hamadan, and we made it a gala evening. We had stopped at the caravanserai of Aligarm, where, on our way to Teheran seven weeks before, we had made our first acquaintance with Persia's medicinal springs, and we organized a grand supper of soup, chicken, onions, sardines, and tinned grapefruit, after which George, who had hired someone in the caravanserai to do the washing-up for him, retired for a bathe in the sulphur springs. Half an hour later he came back to say good night. His arms were full of parcels, and with a shyness that was altogether captivating he gave each of us a silk handkerchief as a parting gift. His other parcels contained presents which he had bought at Tabriz for the princesses at Daulatabad. There was a dress for his mother, stockings for his elder sisters, a pair of very tight riding-breeches for his brother, and for his youngest sister a doll which opened and shut its eyes. He insisted that the doll must have a name, and asked us to christen it. And then somehow I was moved to make what sounds almost like an after-dinner speech. "George," I said, "we were quite right to call you 'George'. You are a king among companions. And what better can we do than to call your doll 'Mary' after our Queen?" George was delighted, and when we left him next morning at Hamadan I really think that he was sorry that the trip was over. I shook him warmly by the hand and asked him if he had enjoyed himself. "Very well," he said and laughed. And then I asked him: "And have you learned anything?" "Yes," he replied, "two things: to swear like an Englishman, and to get up early in the morning." It was now my turn to laugh, and I added rather pompously that I hoped he would go on getting up early. George shook his head. "No," he said, "I'm never going to get up early in the morning again. I'm going to live in my village and

watch my cultivators cultivating." Dear old George. *Ave atque vale.*

And so down the Baghdad road, over the Assadabad Pass, past Bisitun, a last Persian night in Kermanshah, and then the Pai Tak Pass and we were off the Great Central Plateau and down among the foothills and leaving Persia. The Customs were as easy and efficient as they had been when we entered, and there was the swallows' nest over the inspector's desk, though while we had been away the birds had hatched and were fledged and had flown, and we had more cups of tea—our last in Persia—and more gossip with our friendly host. It turned on the topic of plague, rumours of which in Iraq had just reached Persia. I asked whether there had been a similar outbreak this side of the frontier. The answer was the perfect epitome of New Persia's mentality. "We have no plagues in Persia since Riza Khan. For he has taught us to be clean and to take care of ourselves, and we are no longer like the Indians and the Arabs. They are dirty peoples."

And so to Baghdad to prepare for the seven hundred miles of desert-crossing to Damascus. The Iraq Government very naturally takes enormous precautions before allowing isolated motorists to start out on this empty stage, and in due course the Baghdad Fire Brigade issued us with a travel permit and attached us to a civilian convoy. The leader at once held out his hand for the official fee of two pounds. But the East has taught me to pay only on results. "All in good time, my friend," I said. "I pay in Damascus." Next day we were at the appointed meeting-place at the appointed time, but no convoy. However, after waiting for an hour, we went off on our own, and in due course we arrived at Ramadi, on the Euphrates, where the waterless stage begins; and half an hour later up rolled our convoy. Once again the leader held out his palm, and once again I said no; and then he told me that we must be ready to start with him at four o'clock next morning.

We did *start* with him; but in ten minutes his eight-cylindere Greyhound was but a plume of dust on the horizon, and never once did he look over his shoulder to see how we were getting on. However, we got on quite well. True, there was no road, but streaming into the west was a wide tangle of ruts which were quite easy to follow. Still, it was all very boring, and in places it was very trying, for though in stretches five, ten, and twenty miles long the surface was as hard

as a tennis court, there were also long, soft patches which positively invited disaster. But in the end it was not the going which delayed us, but—greatly to our surprise—rain. Two hours before we reached Rutba Wells, our half-way house, a cloudburst struck us like a flail, and ten minutes later we were marooned in the middle of a horrid circle of lakes. But in another half-hour not a drop of water was to be seen, and in scorching sunshine we were bowling along to Rutba with the going, thanks to the rain, almost excellent. At Rutba the convoy leader made a further assault. This time I gave him short shrift. He told me to be ready to leave at seven p.m. for an all-night run to Damascus, and I turned on him like a tiger. "You may start on Domesday," I snarled, "and drive till the cows come home, but this time we are making our own arrangements." He smiled blandly. "As you wish," he said; "anyhow, I will see you in Damascus."

We did see him once again, but not at Damascus. We started from Rutba three hours ahead of him, and while there was still daylight we had the fun of passing through a desert camp from which was being made a survey of the projected trans-desert railway from Syria to Baghdad which will accompany the pipe-line from the Kurdish oilfields. It was an extraordinary experience. We were in empty, undulating country, and etched into the smooth, rolling sand were funny little trenches which looked like bunkers on a mammoth golf-course. Both of us together burst out laughing. And indeed they looked ludicrously futile—so futile, in fact, that it was almost impossible to take them as the serious beginnings of anything so efficient and modern as the great railway and the great pipe-line, both of which in a few years time will be accepted as a matter of course.

And then twilight, and then dusk, and so into a wonderful Eastern night; and with the track showing up clear in our headlights we drove on and on without stopping until midnight, by which time, in nineteen hours, we had covered 301 miles. By then we were both dog-weary and decided to camp out; but just before I fell asleep on the sand I saw glaring headlights approaching from the east. It was our convoy leader; but, though he passed within a hundred yards of us he never stopped, and that was the final straw in so far as concerned his two pounds.

Next afternoon we were in Damascus, and then it was Galilee and Nazareth and Jerusalem and Beersheba, and so to the Palestine frontier and back across Sinai to the palms

of Suez, and then, at last, Cairo. And what pleased us most was our punctuality. We had planned to be back in Cairo—seven thousand miles from door to door—on June 1st. We actually arrived on May the 31st.

Next day Mohamed Mohamed Omar, the little carpenter who had made the caravan body, called to see me. At first he was terribly disappointed over my failure to produce the Shirazi carpet for his wife; but when—I believe to his surprise—I handed him back his ten pounds intact, he seemed perhaps more pleased to have them than he would have been to have received the carpet. For while we had been away Egypt had become deeper engulfed in the world depression, and money was actually short in Mohamed's home. And so to our final reckoning. I produced the famous contract which we had made five months before. I was to pay five pounds extra if the body which he had built survived intact, and I shook him warmly by the hand and told him that never had I paid out money with greater satisfaction. He had built well and truly, and I had not fault to find or even to suggest with his work. And then I gave him a photograph of our outfit, and he rose to say good-bye. "*Insha'allah*, I shall see you again," he said, "and, *Insha'allah*, in a short time, for surely you will come again soon, to disappear again into the unknown, and after many months to reappear as though you had never been gone. Truly you are a great traveller, and in the name of Allah the All-Merciful and of Mohamed his prophet, I wish you happiness and prosperity, and," he added with a grin, "a beautiful wife to share your joyful life."

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

KIT INVENTORY

- 2 Camp beds.
- 2 Sets mosquito poles.
- 2 Mosquito nets.
- 2 Camp washstands.
- 1 Camp bath.
- 2 Folding chairs.
- 1 Abyssinian table.
- 2 Large cotton cushions.
- 1 Fitted luncheon basket.
- 1 Wicker pannier (locking). (Spare parts, etc.)
- 1 Wicker pannier (locking). (Chop box.)
- 1 Hurricane lamp.
- 1 Small wall lamp.
- 2 Kettles.
- 2 Saucepans.
- 1 Frying-pan.
- 1 Two-handled boiler and lid.
- 6 Canvas water-carriers. (*Zimzimias*.)
- 10 Two-gallon metal drums (water).
- 2 Buckets.
- 1 Spade.
- 1 Hatchet.
- 2 Rolls rabbit wire (sand).
- 20 Empty sacks (sand and packing).
- 1 Large Thermos.
- 1 Milk-can.
- 1 Corkscrew.
- Valises, pillows, blankets, towels, etc.
- 1 Spare petrol fitter.
- 4 Packets Bromo.
- 1 Bottle ink.
- 1 Bottle Iodine.

APPENDIX II

TABLE OF DISTANCES

	Miles		Miles
CAIRO		TEHERAN	
Suez	90	Kum	102
Nekhl	89	Isfahan	173
El Arish	124	Persepolis	274
Beersheba	134	Shiraz	35
Jerusalem	60		<hr/>
			584
	497		
JERUSALEM		SHIRAZ	
Haifa	110	Isfahan	309
Tiberias	50	Sultanabad	208
Sidon	97	Hamadan	123
Beirut	33	Jinjan	211
	<hr/>	Tabriz	200
	290		<hr/>
BEIRUT			1051
Tripoli	65		
Lattakia	95	TABRIZ	
Aleppo	119	Sakkis, via Kulichandi ..	170
	<hr/>	Tabriz, via Deh Karra-	
	279	ghan	185
ALEPPO		Hamadan	411
Rakka	120	Kermanshah	116
Nisibin	235	Kaniqn	138
Mosul	111	Baghdad	111
Baghdad	257		<hr/>
	<hr/>		1131
	723		
BAGHDAD		BAGHDAD	
Kaniqn	111	Damascus	563
Kermanshah	138	Jerusalem	161
Hamadan	116	El Arish	194
Kasvin	149	Cairo	269
Teheran	97		<hr/>
	<hr/>		1187
	611		
TEHERAN		Total distance direct	
Meshed es Saar (Caspian)	218	running	6991
Resht	203	Incidental excursions	632
Teheran	217		<hr/>
	<hr/>	Total logged	7623
	638		



